

**Choreographing postcolonial identities in Britain: Cultural  
policies and the politics of performance, 1983-2008**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the way in which dance work produced by postcolonial dance artists is often misread and exoticised by critics, funders and audiences. Yet the works produced have a disruptive effect and are products and clear indications of the sometimes oppressive processes that create cultural representation and identities. These postcolonial dance artists also have to contend with problematic umbrella terms such as 'Black' and 'South Asian' which are not fully descriptive of their dance practice and have the effect of stereotyping the work produced. The thesis investigates the artists Mavin Khoo, Shobana Jeyasingh, Akram Khan, Bode Lawal, Robert Hylton and Phoenix Dance Company who have created works that have asserted their individual agency through the use of particular cultural dance practices and have engaged in concepts such as classicism, modernism and postmodernism in order to establish a place within the British dance canon. Choreographic work produced by artists such as Khoo and Hylton have 'educated' audiences about the dance traditions that have been 'passed down' to them, whilst artists and companies like Phoenix have worked within a primarily Western medium, yet acknowledging that their work is informed by their distinctive African, African-Caribbean and Indian identities also.

Although the work produced by these artists is often viewed from a white and Eurocentric perspective and exoticised to fit with conventional notions of 'Indianness' and 'Blackness', this thesis demonstrates that through the use of methodologies from cultural theory/policy, postcolonial theory and dance studies it is possible to reveal and illuminate meanings in the choreography and performances of

postcolonial artists, and open up the dialogue that their works initiate in a multicultural and globalised context.

## **Preface**

This investigation of postcolonial dance practices in the UK reflects my own experience as a postcolonial subject. The relevance of 'traditional' dance forms that have made their way into the British context is a question that has vexed me, especially given my formal dance training which has remained in the high art Euro-American dance forms such as Contemporary, Ballet, Jazz, Tap and so on, and yet, some of the most interesting work that I have encountered has come from postcolonial dance artists who have similar backgrounds to myself.

My great-great-grandparents went with the British from Pochan in South China to work and settle in the British colonies of Malaya and Singapore. My father was born and raised in Malaysia. He was a British citizen and lived and worked in Britain for over forty years, before his passing a few years ago. My mother is British and I have led a privileged life as a British citizen. I have lived in the multicultural city of Leicester since birth and although the fashions, tastes, foods of non-Western cultures and other customs have entered into the British context, I have continued to hear and witness racist attitudes to non-white people, their customs and ways of life. I get very angry when I hear people talking about this country being 'dominated by foreigners' and about them coming to this country to 'steal our jobs' and yet, their contribution to British society and the economic climate is rarely considered by those who say this. The consideration for the predicament and determination to be able to participate actively in the British context by immigrants and migrants and to make a valid contribution to developments of what can be classified as 'British' is scarcely

acknowledged in a meaningful manner. Nor is there rarely a consideration for the colonial legacy that has brought them to this country in the first place.

Having lived in the British context all of my life, I have various feelings about the society at various points; anger, anxiety, hope and an awareness of opportunity and possibility, not only as a human being, but as a dance artist too. Although expectations may be specific as an artist, I have come to realise that art can act as transformer as a society and function as a critical discourse. I am interested in artists that can confront the Eurocentric bias that still pervades and offer a radical alternative to the context of postcolonial reality. Therefore when I was introduced to the work of dance artists such as Khan, I was immediately drawn to the way in which aspects of his identity were being expressed and explored creatively through choreography and performance. This sort of work is able to challenge preconceived stereotypes that are inherent in British society and dominant discourses that I had learnt about throughout my education. Thus, my research project investigates how particular artists and companies forge identities that are both British and South Asian for example, through their choreography, style and aesthetic quality. This also requires an examination of the politico-cultural environment in which dance artists in British work, and how that environment impinges on the act of making and performing and/or the way it is received. If work by 'other' artists can make it into the 'mainstream' of British dance culture, are all cultural identifiers and discrete nuances always visible?

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## Introduction

Since the 1990s, dance practice in Britain has demonstrated greater diversity and fluidity, with many specifically cultural and traditional dance forms from the Indian subcontinent, Africa and also the Caribbean, having made their way into the white 'mainstream' dance sector. There are many reasons for this shift, which include the effects of colonialism and immigration, societal factors such as globalisation, changes in political agendas, technological improvement, new patterns in the artistic and aesthetic field and cultural policies. This thesis aims to read and analyse the choreography, performance, identity and cultural politics in postcolonial dance work and its relation to mainstream white contemporary dance in Britain. Focusing on examples of work by the artists and companies Shobana Jeyasingh, Mavin Khoo, Akram Khan, Phoenix Dance Theatre, Bode Lawal and Robert Hylton, I will investigate the relationship between multicultural dance practice and postcolonial British identity formation. I will examine the extent to which some practitioners/companies are engaging critically in Euro-American notions of classicism, modernism and/or postmodernism in the mainstream British dance context. I will argue that the work of these artists/companies have a disruptive 'effect' and are 'products' and clear indications of the sometimes oppressive processes that create cultural representation and identity. It must also be acknowledged that these postcolonial dance artists/companies have a 'positive effect' in terms of diversifying the aesthetic of British contemporary dance.

The diversity of cultures currently working within the dance sector in Britain provides enrichment and the possibility of interesting and innovative work. It is my intention to

demonstrate that the artists chosen for analysis are not imitating Western modes of theatrical dance and presentation, but have generally developed highly original dance works, which were and continue to be deeply rooted in particular cultural dance practices. For artists who become skilled in more than one dance culture, or who decide to learn a dance form which is not most easily available to them, the level of personal investment is clearly very high. To move in ways different to those instilled by particular dance training is difficult as the body may literally have grown into a desired shape (see Lawson 1975, Foster 1997). There have been many ways in which to convince others about the need for diversity and equality: 'a moral case for diversity arising out of the Stephen Lawrence inquiry (it's good for others)<sup>1</sup>, and economic case for diversity (it's good for the business), a legal case (it's the law), but the creative case (it's good for the arts) remains as yet under-developed' (Mahamdallie 2010: 110).

This chapter aims to introduce methodologies from cultural theory/policy, postcolonial theory and dance studies and to demonstrate that despite their differences these can be synthesised for the purposes of this thesis, in order to illuminate the issues and meanings in the choreography and performance work of the chosen artists/companies. Firstly, I will explain the choice of the case studies; Jeyasingh, Khoo, Khan, Phoenix, Lawal and Hylton, and justify the chronological parameters of the study. This chapter will also highlight the issue of reading dance

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<sup>1</sup> An inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence was agreed in 1997 due to public pressure. An extensive report (The Macpherson Report 1999) pointed towards fundamental flaws in the behaviour of the police during the murder investigation of Lawrence. The report criticised the Metropolitan Police (Police force in London) and concluded that the police did not carry out the investigation in an appropriate manner and labelled the force to be institutionally racist. The inquiry prompted the study and promotion of a greater appreciation of the needs of different communities by the police service and strategies followed (including a Government White Paper *Building Communities, Beating Crime* (2004)) aimed at using learning and development to improve police performance on race and diversity.

work of non-Western origin as problematic, due to the Eurocentric bias that pervades ways of seeing and analysing at present, so the 'value' of their work needs to be recognised. I will demonstrate that whilst dance artists may try to use labels, contexts and funds to make 'serious' art that questions and subverts, the framework in which they operate will signify a pre-determined meaning and value, thus, I examine issues surrounding postcolonial dance and aesthetics and the problematic of their relation as dance becomes a means for negotiating cultural identities. It is necessary to reject the idea that there is not a general aesthetic experience and/or general 'inner' subjective, creative processes, which are common to all the arts and dance specifically (see David Best 1975).

It is my view that the case studies that I have chosen for analysis have been omitted from the dominant canon of dance history and have been marginalised from the mainstream of dance company productions and theatre programming dance. However, these artists are able to problematise the dominant discourse through their use of choreographic strategies, individual performance qualities and artistic decisions. The case studies have been chosen from a range of different categories; racial, ethnic, dance genre, class and so on. Thus, they demonstrate differing relationships with classicism, modernism and postmodernism. The South Asian case studies include Shobana Jeyasingh, Mavin Khoo and Akram Khan who fit into two of the following categories put forward by Chitra Sundaram that are particularly important in this thesis: there are three broad aesthetic categories for dance-making of South Asian origin in Britain; the Contemporary, the Classical and the 'Traditional'. Even the 'contemporary' has come to be regarded as 'classic'. Sundaram argues that the self-reported hybridity, 'is shaping up as an identifiable contemporary dance

language with self-consciously chosen South Asian references that are being institutionalised through the teaching and analysis of the work of the choreographer Shobana Jeyasingh and, soon, of dancer/choreographer...Akram Khan' (Sundaram in Katrak 2011: 201). She adds that: 'The Contemporary aesthetic for South Asian dance in Britain is clearly Western' (ibid). Sundaram proposes that the 'classical' part of this tripartite delineation includes an 'imploded Bharata Natyam aesthetic (Mavin Khoo)' (ibid). The 'traditional' category proposed by Sundaram refers to those attempting to keep the various classical/folk dance forms alive who work predominantly within their community. Although 'tradition' is important to provide a context and reference point for the work that is produced by Jeyasingh, Khoo and Khan, it is not necessarily very important in this thesis. Whilst there are many British South Asian dance artists dealing with traditional Kathak and Bharata Natyam, for the purposes of this thesis I am not interested in work that is about preserving 'traditional' forms, but work that innovates, critiques and/or subverts dominant discourse. The categories proposed by Sundaram parallel and promulgate the Indian nationalist project (explained briefly in Chapter 3), and are about re-making and re-shaping the Indian culture.

All of the British South Asian dance artists chosen are interested in the 'intellectualism of dance' and Jeyasingh, Khoo<sup>2</sup> and Khan engage cerebrally with

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<sup>2</sup> 'South Asian dance' was a term utilised by dancers and arts officers to replace the term 'Indian dance' to encompass the complex Indian situation, with its many cultures, religions, languages and dance systems, evolving in the 1980s. The term 'Indian dance' is still used due to the origins of many of the forms in India presently, and in part due to the Indian dominance of dance activity in the subcontinent. Since Khoo has engaged with western standards of performance and has carved a name for himself as a 'contemporary dancer' for the mainstream British audience, he becomes easily subsumed under this 'South Asian' umbrella. He also explicitly acknowledges his global position through his understanding of classicism in Bharata Natyam and ballet. In a more traditional performance, Khoo will demonstrate an 'artistry' translating classical Indian

their dance languages in order to express their alternative ways of being 'South Asian': Jeyasingh has a tendency to create formal abstract work which negotiates classicism, tradition, modernism and globalisation to create a postcolonial account of a diasporic global identity, and attempt to appeal to the range of audiences within Britain; Khoo utilises virtuosity and mastery, integral to Indian notions of classicism, and yet, his incorporation of balletic technique offers opportunities to rethink balletic classicism, and in doing so, places value on his Indian dance heritage and history and attempts to give it acknowledgement and equality within the mainstream dance discourse; whereas Khan has challenged tradition and modernity in order to occupy an 'in-between' space where he is able to comment on the personal and political, and highlight the dynamism of living in diaspora and makes his Indian heritage applicable and relevant in the British context.

In the allegiance for Britain's 'multicultural' agenda, a select few, (I would argue that Khan and Jeyasingh in particular, and Khoo to a certain extent could be classified as such), have been 'celebrated' and seen as 'representatives' of colour and/or their entire 'communities'. Khan has been celebrated by critics and could be viewed as part of a confident coterie of British Asians that includes writer Monica Ali and film director Gurinder Chadha making a mark on Britain's arts and popular culture scene, who make work that is clearly informed by identity politics, but want to be viewed as 'just artists' making work with important artistic questions. The purpose of the development of Akram Khan Dance Company in 2000 was not only to examine the relationship between Western dance and traditional Kathak, but to emphasise the

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text, music and understanding of the context in a cohesive whole which requires an audience to invest and interpret the constituent features and complexities of Bharata Natyam.

dis/order in the structural and mathematical elements comprising both dance styles. Khan's 'mathematical' dance involves several transits – between tradition and modernity, clarity and chaos, geometry and disorder, past and present, South Asian and British identities (see Khan in Mohaiemen 2003 n.p). Jeyasingh too, due to the complexity of her work, has been able to, on a basic level, resist a level of commodification even as it passes through the global circuits of capital, and refuses marketing as exotic entertainment. Non-Western cultures are supposedly marked in the realm of 'tradition', and seemingly stuck in antiquity (despite encounters with colonisation which saw the implementation of developmental logic that characterises Modernity). Khoo 'plays' with the notion that classicism demands a certain appreciation of the 'rules' and makes demands of its audiences to understand and appreciate 'bilingualism'. It is for these reasons that these particular British South Asian case studies have been chosen and examined in chronological order.

The British based artists/companies who are Black chosen for analysis are Phoenix Dance Theatre, Bode Lawal and Robert Hylton; they cover contemporary, jazz/hip hop and African contemporary dance which are the three main areas in which Black British dancers work. Bob Ramdhanie (2005) has argued that during the 1990s, realistically, black dance companies were producing work for black communities throughout Britain, but then attempting to market their product to middle scale and large white venues. Phoenix contrasted this in that the company utilised contemporary dance techniques in an attempt to position themselves as a mainstream British repertory company and yet deal with themes that reflect their

African and Caribbean heritage<sup>3</sup>. Lawal then, reflects a different (albeit small) subset of artists who acknowledge that 'traditional' African-based dance work satisfies a purpose and has adopted a lifestyle that reflects the cultural traditions of the continent and thus there is a new assertion of spirituality within his work. Whilst Hylton utilises hip hop which is linked to an urban youth culture (and previous generations of black youth may not have been conscious and critical of the statements that they were making about the dominant discourse), he is attempting to mobilise the conflation with the popular in order to educate audiences about legacy and heritage.

Whilst the chosen British based artists/companies who are Black have all 'succeeded' in gaining funding (Phoenix, Lawal and Hylton have all had Arts Council of England (ACE) funding), ACE withdrew funding to both Hylton and Lawal in 2008. For Phoenix, funding brought about obligation; restructuring which meant that they were accountable to a board, labelling as a 'black dance company' which brought about certain expectations as to the kind of work to be produced and performed. These three case studies were chosen in order to examine the reaction they have had to work through (from audiences and funders after becoming 'successful'), the continuity of the struggle to survive and persist in creating and producing work, examining the wider context of the phenomenon of this initial 'success' in gaining funding and the terms on which the success was gained. All of these

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<sup>3</sup> When Phoenix was founded in 1981 it was an all male and all black company and they created work with a black sensibility. When Neville Campbell took over as artistic director in 1987, he directed the company towards more modern dance and introduced white choreographers to create work for the company. However, when Margaret Morris became artistic director in 1991 the company was still closely associated with its black male roots and the company voiced a more explicit concern to represent the Black British experience. Further, when Thea Nerissa Barnes took over in 1996, she continued to draw on black cultures as inspiration for dances with universal appeal. However, by 2002 when Darshan Singh Bhuller took over, Phoenix was reinvented as a repertory company.

artists/companies have also engaged in grassroots or community-based work (Phoenix was 'born' out of the educational work at Harehills; Lawal works extensively to educate students about African dance; whilst Hylton wants audiences to know the roots of hip hop; and Lawal and Hylton have continued their community work extensively despite funding cuts in 2008), and it is their ability to make work that is rooted in the issues of their community at large, and yet demand top production value when working in large producing houses and theatres, their attempts to move across these seemingly oppositional categories, which made these case studies interesting choices for me.

The parameters of starting the investigation at 1983 and ending in 2008 are chosen because they are significant 'landmarks' in terms of the artists/companies to be examined and the development of cultural policy in Britain; Phoenix was founded in 1981 and the piece *Nightlife at the Flamingo* (1983) is included for analysis. Further, dance has witnessed an unprecedented growth in scale and ambition since the end of the 1970s and there was a growth in independent companies and this was later followed by the establishment of a separate department for dance within the Arts Council of Britain in 1984. It was at this time that independent funding for dance began, as prior to this dance funding was managed alongside music. Thus began the UK's engagement with contemporary dance and the influence of, initially America, and then Europe, South East Asia and the African Diaspora on the evolution of the form. Although it is clear that the UK has an increasingly diverse culture and the dance aesthetic in this country is informed by the plurality of styles, histories and cultures that exist, as well as increased international touring by its leading artists, it appears that 'we have reached a moment in time where a level of



homogenisation is evident [which]...has had an impact on the dance aesthetic within some of our (the ACE's) subsidised touring companies' (Burns & Harrison 2008: 18). By 2007/08, it was evident that the ACE's spending on dance had declined. The beginning of 2008 was not a good year for ACE. As the country fell into recession, Arts Councils and ministries of culture were working to minimise the negative uncertain times. Thus, 2008 was seen as a sensible 'cut off' point for the study as the funding policies and amount of money available to companies were perhaps limited and/or unavailable (for example, both Hylton and Lawal had their ACE funding withdrawn).

Further, some of the artists/companies still receiving funding took different artistic directions around this time. For example, Khan created *bahok* (2008) as a special collaboration with China's flagship classical ballet company, National Ballet of China. Khan did not dance in *bahok* and the choreography was consequently more tailored to the diverse talents of the international dancers; his use of text was not well-received either. Khan's virtuosity has lured star performers from other disciplines and in 2008, Khan co-directed and performed *in-i* with actress Juliette Binoche. Yet, this performance with Binoche (not a trained dancer) was dismissed as a 'vanity project' by some critics. Javier de Frutos (who has been described as a 'loose cannon' choreographer (see Roy 2011)) became director of Phoenix in 2006. He completely changed the company's profile, with his own works and revivals of several American modern dance classics, made for bracing programmes. Although the company were invited to headline the Venice Biennale, behind the scenes there was internal squabbling (see Roy 2011), and in 2008 De Frutos was abruptly sacked by the board

and the dancers left too. Former company dancer Sharon Watson inherited a shell of a company in 2009.

### **Widely held but unconsidered ideas about exoticism and fusion in dance by postcolonial British choreographers**

Khoo, Khan, Jeyasingh and Phoenix are all regularly funded by ACE and other high profile funders, and are well respected and of high visibility within the field of dance<sup>4</sup>.

Thus, there are extensive reviews about their works throughout their careers. In order to show that the reading of the work is problematic at present because critics view the work from an ethnocentric/white perspective, I will highlight a review about some of the choreographers chosen for analysis in this thesis. It is my contention that dance artists are in effect only permitted to incorporate their 'otherness' into Western modes of presentation and practices, if they do so in a way that reflects and sustains the British Cultural policies that help perpetuate a climate that limits the ways in which 'otherness' can be performed. I will highlight some of the more contentious statements made by the three critics writing about Khoo, Khan and Jeyasingh.

I begin with Lindsey Clarke's review of *devi* (2006) choreographed by Khoo and Cavanna, from the London Dance website:

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<sup>4</sup> Hylton and Lawal started to receive ACE funding in 2005 due to funding changes which meant that there was £1,011,000 to be invested on developing African People's Dance (APD). Hylton's Urban Classicism became a Regularly Funded Organisation (RFO) in its own right and Lawal's Sakoba Dance Company were also added to the funding portfolio through their regional offices. However, this funding was withdrawn in 2008 and other funding opportunities have been utilised.

You know you're in trouble with a dance when the notes you're taking are describing the linear action of the piece rather than gut reactions of the work as a whole... There was serious intent, artful choreography and a brooding simply lit set, yet something was missing. Not quite enough flair, **exoticism** or emotional intensity to sustain a dedicated 45 minute performance at the Linbury (that's 33.3p a minute in the arena seats) and **not enough overt thematic work** to carry it solely on "the sensuality and physicality of the awakening female spirit"... Technical excellence and intelligence applied throughout, **cultural fusion choreography** courtesy of Cavanna and Khoo was thoughtful and at times, beautiful, but this piece failed to move me (2006, my emphasis).

Critics often gush over, and fetishize the overt 'exoticism' of dancers of colour, which Clarke believes is missing in Khoo's *devi*. Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) argues that exoticism functions in a variety of imperial contexts as a mechanism of aesthetic substitution which 'replaces the impress of power with the blandishments of curiosity' (1994: 159). It is my contention however, that it is not necessarily curiosity that replaces power, but that it is a function that disguises it because the initial innocent genuine curiosity of 'foreignness' in exoticism are embedded in one another. Graham Huggan (2001) has argued that late twentieth century exoticisms are the products, not so much the expansion of the nation on its own than of a worldwide market as a whole. Exoticism has shifted from a less privileged mode of aesthetic perception to an increasingly global mode of mass-market consumption. There is still a hierarchical nature of cultural difference which causes the inequalities and the different ways of seeing and reading art work, amongst other things. To label a dance work as 'cultural fusion choreography' as Clarke does here, is problematic since the term 'fusion' provides concern over cultural appropriation, how cultures and nationalities are distinguished, and whether they are equally and fairly represented; this label does not allow for an understanding of the personal journey, and circumstance of the individual

choreographer (who wants to embrace multiple cultural references and exchange information with other artists), and becomes representative of a particular British identity. 'Overt thematic work' is also a choreographic device used in western forms; there is no prescription to say that it is necessary in all dance forms.

Renée Renouf's review of Khan's *Kaash* (2002) from *Ballet Magazine* makes similar generalisations about the difference of Asian dance artists:

Make no mistake about it; Akram Khan has forged a very special **East-West Kingdom**, not only of his circumstances, but with two extraordinarily powerful dance styles...Along with a scintillating mix of modern dancers, **buffs and Indians...What I saw in Kaash, without referring to the program notes, was the Lord Shiva writ large, a member of the Hindu pantheon less frequently treated in Kathak than our delightful scamp, the Lord Krishna.** That's what a little exposure to Indian abhinaya will do for you...While Khan may not have been exposed to Kathakali, his use of low thrusts of one leg and bent supporting leg is reminiscent of dances I remember seeing Shivaram perform, as well as Shivaram's demonstrations of creature life. Such creature life Khan shows us! **I can't imagine any European artist attempting this with such fusion of spirit. It cinched the impression of Indian earth for me...**It [the dance] doesn't have to go anywhere; it doesn't have to say anything; it simply vibrates in your skull and lurks around you like a cosmic force. This type of totality, beyond self, is something hard for the Western dance...**Khan has presented his audiences with quite a slice of Asia aided by Western dance and production techniques** (2006; my emphasis).

There is a difference between an anthropologist/ethnographer and a critic. I feel it necessary to make this distinction clear, because although there may be a great deal of study and time spent watching Kathak (as above), it does not create expert knowledge<sup>5</sup>. It is difficult to find the balance between writing with confidence and

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<sup>5</sup> Sally Banes has highlighted that writers on dance have more recently been influenced by or trained in ethnographic methods and have turned to analysing and judging dance in these terms (1994: 41).

authority, and writing as if an expert. Often dance reviewers, when writing about genres that they know little about technically, write in an impressionistic manner, not realising that they are using criteria that is quite different to those that they use generally to evaluate a performance. To stereotype a European artist as not being able to perform or choreograph with a 'fusion of spirit' or passion, harks back to British imperial history which set assumptions that there was something unique and innately spiritual about an Indian artist. Khan may be of Bangladesh origin, but he was born and brought up in London. Renouf writes that Khan is able to present his audiences with 'quite a slice of Asia aided by Western dance and production techniques' – this is quite a feat for one man and one evening's work. It is not possible for him to represent the whole of Asia. Further, the assumption is made that Western dance and production techniques are universal and not needing of any inspiration or ideologies from non-western dance forms; only the West are capable of innovation.

Mark Monahan's review of Jeyasingh's *Exit no Exit/Flicker* (2005/6) in the *Daily Telegraph* creates a formula for her hybrid dance vocabulary:

Jeyasingh has gained a reputation as one of the most intrepid pioneers in modern dance. **Fusing** the classical Bharata Natyam technique of her native India with her subsequent contemporary training in London, she is **generally credited with having invented a startling new hybrid vocabulary**, often darting brilliantly between the two styles, and always whipping up an onstage world quite her own. To her credit, Jeyasingh has clearly lost none of her craving for originality...As Nyman's electronic beats pound and crackle like heightened static, the seven dancers scythe aggressively in and out of each other's space, **the East still very much visible in the inflections of the head, hands and feet, but the West now dominating**...Of course, the point of modern dance is to suggest rather than explain, to raise questions rather

than answer them. But quality of movement is all, and Jeyasingh's didn't once cause the hairs to prickle on my arms, despite some committed performances (2006, my emphasis).

Bharata Natyam has a very particular use of the head, hands and feet, but this is a worthy cross-cultural dance experiment. 'Fusing' implies that the process is simple, mixing different ingredients in a straightforward manner, with no conscious consideration for the final outcome and its ability to criticise dominant discourse. Innovation is possible within any dance vocabulary. But it is necessary to ask why this fusion is happening: what is the purpose of the 'fusion' of dance forms, and what are the comments being made?

I believe that this kind of writing produced by dance critics is indicative of a general way of thinking. In some ways the language, terminology and tone in which some reviews are written can be seen as challenging and derogatory, and do not allow for a reading of the work on its own terms. I acknowledge that these reviews are written by critics rather than scholars, but they ignore the subtle aspects of cultural politics in the work, and dismiss the possibility that the dance artists could try and make any kind of interventions through their work. Sally Banes has noted that 'both artists and critics bring to their work aesthetic values that are culturally specific. To ignore or avoid what some might see as the extra-aesthetic dimensions of the work – especially where those elements are evident in the work – is to be ahistoric and amoral' (1994: 42-3).

Jeyasingh has said that, 'the language is much better developed for literature than it is for dance' (1997: 12). Since dance is unlike verbal language and 'usually creates meaning only vaguely' (Banes 1994: 28), the hermeneutic task the critic fulfils is an important one. Jeyasingh continues that,

With my work critics look at it and say 'oh this is an East-West collaboration', but they would not use the term to describe a novel or literary work...with dance it is very difficult; somehow with dance more than any other artform, people expect to stay within a specific historical framework of reference (1997: 12).

Dance critics are generally 'trained' in watching and critiquing high brow art forms of ballet and contemporary dance since,

Western theatrical dancing developed out of an uneven mix of social dancing, party entertainment, street performance, and court spectacle. Because of this, it has always been responsive to current trends. At its most profound, like the other arts, it reflects aspects of the current world picture; at its most superficial, it acknowledges the current fashions (Jowitt 1988: 9).

It is perhaps easier to place Western theatrical dance into social and cultural context since there is a greater understanding of how the developments in philosophy and the other arts may have influenced the domains created onstage (given the legacies of imperialism and globalisation). Therefore, hybrid dance forms and work produced by postcolonial artists provide 'confusion' and a new set of criteria which is unfamiliar to the Eurocentric norm. There are, of course, those performances that are seen as

'multicultural' but continue to perpetuate Euro-cultural hegemony. Dance critic, Deborah Jowitt, wrote that as

A dance critic, attending performances night after night, devises strategies for keeping eye and mind fresh.....I imagined myself an anthropologist skulking in ambush, observing the activities of members of a hitherto undiscovered tribe – trying to discern their customs and social hierarchy before I stepped out of the bushes and made myself known to them (Jowitt 1988: 8).

Further, Marcia Siegel writes that:

The emphasis on traditional forms is easier for us critics because more has been done about it. More writing has been done, more analysis has been done. But these categories are changing, and they are much more complex and multi-faceted than any other monolithic, static, fixed idea (1991: 14).

In Western dance, the role of the critic is seen as establishing and protecting norms (Siegel 1991). It is unfair to completely blame the critics for 'misreading' the dance work aforementioned, as they are part of an aesthetic paradigm where ideas pervade thinking and determine practical forms. Critics help to form public opinion about dance work, thus, they can perpetuate this cycle of 'misreading'. The relationship between the choreographers, audience, critics, people who market the work, venues, the Arts Council and other funders is complicated. The critics act as a guide to the 'less trained' public, drawing attention to specific details and ideas. The problem is compounded when funding bodies and critics do not sufficiently understand the processes and particular cultural dance practices and how to write about them. There is also a need to market the work in a meaningful and



understanding way and not fund according to particular cultural agendas that are prevalent at the time, making their work a 'tick-box' quota. Funding bodies and venues require information from artists in relation to their artistic vision and specific dance works that place an 'exacting formula' to work from. Although some artists get to articulate their ideas and thinking further in post-performance discussions and various forums, unless they are very articulate and effective communicators, there is not much opportunity to explain intentions and processes fully and exactly. In fact, dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster, reflecting on the anxiety generated by the usage of spoken language in dance, interprets the anti-intellectual attitude some contemporary choreographers have towards articulating their work, as an attempt on their part to preserve the non-verbal purity of dance. In her book *Reading Dancing*, Foster observes 'how the notoriously discreet choreographer Merce Cunningham refrains from discussing his work publicly, [Cunningham] wants the dance to speak for itself in a language all its own' (1986: XVI). Few scholars have addressed the subtle suspicion towards a language that exists both in the artistic practice as well as in the critical dance writing and, as a result, some choreographers and dance writers' reluctance to analyse ideas informing dance works is an attitude rarely challenged in the dance world today. Further, Richard Schechner (2002: 226) argues that many artists intentionally create post-colonial, post-modern work, respectful, ironic or parodic, to overturn or subvert the colonial horror of 'mixing' or 'impurity', which also complicates the understanding.

As was stated earlier in this chapter, the arts community is diversifying along with the wider society, but the question about the value of this is still unanswered. A paper by cultural economists argued that diversity must be measured as a component of

intrinsic value, a significant point that collapses the false opposition that has been set up in some quarters between diversity and excellence in the arts:

In the arts, perhaps above all other fields, diversity is an important requirement. Almost everyone has their own personal conception of good art. So aside from encouraging experimentation and innovation, diversity is an important economic requirement in its own right. The arts world is as dominated by fashions and establishments as any other public sphere, and it is notoriously easy for struggling talent to be overlooked and minority tastes to be excluded. The valuation of diversity itself, an element of rational choice, is an aspect of establishing intrinsic value that is tackled by economics. But it is entirely consistent with – and should support – artistic autonomy (Bakshi, Freeman, Hitchen 2009).

The question of a hierarchy of cultural forms and practices that merit public support, and of judgements of quality, other than those of popularity, is hidden in current policy discourse under the fluid term of ‘excellence’. The claim is made that current policy is focused on democratising culture by widening access or lowering barriers to the widest possible range of cultural experiences. Thus, there is a clear contradiction at the heart of current policy between the stress of access and education and the emphasis on excellence and the ‘creative core’. The problem therefore becomes about defining and measuring excellence and rejecting popularity (Selwood 2000). The term ‘excellence’ within arts policy discourse then becomes a code for exclusivity and for the hierarchy of forms (see Garnham 2005).

At present, ‘creativity’ has become widely promoted (if not always defined) concept in the UK public policy and in society more widely. Much literature suggests that creativity is the key to national prosperity, enabling the UK to compete in an

increasingly global economy, and that there is a need to foster a more creative national culture and to exploit the UK's creative assets more fully (Cox 2005, Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2008). Alongside creativity, innovation (the exploitation of new ideas) is seen as a key driver of growth, and much more recent public policy has been concerned with investing the education, skills, research and development required for a flourishing 'knowledge economy' (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills 2008). Institutional concepts of 'creativity' refer to broad education-orientated notions of developing individual 'expression', social identities and communication skills. As Rasheed Araeen has argued 'free imagination is fundamental to creativity' (2010: 30), thus whilst the individual imagination may carry with it personal experiences about the 'diversity of cultures', its creativity cannot be predetermined by these experiences. Specific cultural roots may not be completely evident in the dance work that is then produced. It is more likely, instead, that when creativity faces a culturally specific precondition or an institutionally imposed cultural framework, it will lose its vital force. There is no denying that one's culture can be central in the creation of dance and performance, but when this is seen as a predetermination of creativity, then its power becomes limited and contained.

Whereas research by Andrée Grau into South Asian dance in Britain (2002: 9) has highlighted that artists (such as Khan) are reluctant to see the concept of identity as being central to their practice and performance work, this is primarily because they do not want to be marginalised as they see that Western theatre dance (ballet or contemporary dance for example), are rarely given the 'cultural' treatment (this will be discussed further in 'Mainstream dance and conventional aesthetics' later in this

introduction). It is my contention that the choreographers for analysis have made particular choices about aesthetics, politics, form, content, technology and structure which reflect their positions as artists living in Diaspora in Britain. They may draw upon particular 'cultural' traditions outside of the mainstream dance canon, but they have made decisions about how to 'treat' these aesthetics, which are inevitably connected to political and artistic choices. Thus, the aim of this thesis is not to give an account of choreographers' intentions, but to create understandings of their works that allows value to be recognised, along with the potential to make a disruptive effect on dominant discourse and comment on cultural politics.

British Asian dancers and British based dancers who are Black are not necessarily in the 'same place' in terms of how they conceive their artistic practice. They have different working methods and practices, and indeed, differing attitudes about how their artistic practice relate to aspects of their lives, thus, an analysis of their work will not always bring out the same kinds of concerns. For example, Khoo is evidently drawing upon a particular classical tradition by using Bharata Natyam, but he makes a specific treatment of the technique and of classicism; whereas my analysis of Phoenix will focus upon the use of and intersection of technique and treatment of particular themes related to identity and politics. It is the desire of the artists included to claim a place in the mainstream, and in doing so, demonstrate the ability to diversify it, problematise and disrupt the 'norm' (which is assumed to be a white heterosexual one), and to comment on cultural politics that allows both British Asian dance artists and British based dancers who are Black to be discussed and analysed within the same theoretical framework of this thesis. Thus, it is imperative to recognise that whilst these artists/companies may all object to being 'ethnicised', and

may agree that being hyphenated British means that they share an experience of relocation, they will also stress that this relocation is multifaceted.

British political agendas have ensured that cultural diversity has been welcomed, accepted and 'fashionable'. A culturally diverse dance company can offer 'exoticism'; something engaging or different, possibly live music, a sense of openness to world influences, the global village, Britain's urban diversity and very strong visual images. Rightly or wrongly, culturally diverse dance work is perceived to offer personal role models for young people in minority ethnic groups and major opportunities for outreach or education work. However, it is evident from the various interviews and writings produced by the artists included in this thesis, that they are not interested in 'fusing' dance styles, do not aim to be utilised to fulfil a particular agenda or for ticking the 'cultural diversity' box. It is their circumstances as artists living in diaspora which makes them produce hybrid choreography. Cheryl Stock writes of the different ways these performances employ hybridity:

For some, it may be a complex layering through the body of diverse stylistic and cultural practices, resulting in the 'overlapping circles of consciousness' to which [Johannes] Birringer refers (2000: 172). Or it may be in the gaps between these forms and processes, which [Homi] Bhabha's theory of hybridity (1994) calls the 'inbetween spaces'. This in-between place of space-time resonates in many cultures (2009: 288).

Some artists may evidently employ particular cultural practices, but these are then critiqued, discarded or expanded upon, and ultimately reconfigured and

choreographed in the work in the British context. For me, this is about their position 'in-between' cultures.

Although the artists/companies included may not always articulate their work as being 'political', my intention is to analyse their work in a way which grounds them politically. In this way, the work is culturally located for political purpose in postcolonial times, either demonstrating the possibilities of a truly diverse dance sector or deliberate global collaborations for artistic and research purposes. This thesis will demonstrate that whilst dance artists and choreographers may try to use labels, contexts and funds to make 'serious' art that questions and subverts, the framework in which they operate will signify a predetermined meaning and value. In the rest of this chapter I will interrogate the terms and concepts of aesthetics, identity politics and 'mainstream' dance in order to then determine how the dance artists/companies are negotiating Western and non-western aesthetics and how audiences may 'read' these; how identity is negotiated through the work and what their particular identity may determine; and to consider the arguments that the artists/companies have about attempting to be a part of the 'mainstream' and the problematic of this.

## **Aesthetics**

It is necessary to examine aesthetics in order to explore issues around Western Eurocentric hegemony and how then it is possible to develop an approach to aesthetic appreciation beyond these Eurocentric modes. Thus, for those working

with non-western dance aesthetics, a culturally specific aesthetic appreciation is required, and their relation to politics is considered in order to provide proper recognition for the original intent.

When brought into English and other European languages in the nineteenth century, 'aesthetic' was used to indicate the response to art and was especially concerned with beauty. Although still used in that way, the term 'aesthetics' has also taken on the trappings of a philosophical system, often stated as the philosophy of beauty and good taste. A philosophical system is derived from a set of principles, thus a philosophy of aesthetics must be based on aesthetic principles. Traditionally, in the Western world, the common concept in this paradigm was 'beauty'. Beauty, of course, is not inherent in a dance or performance work, but it is a mental construct of an individual which may or may not be shared by others. When one decides something is beautiful, he/she is making a value judgement.

Artistic dance, is defined as a specific type of human, complex and highly articulated movement, deliberately and systematically cultivated for its own sake, or in other words, as a system of organised and formalised movements conveying a meaning which an artist expresses consciously and transfers to a spectator on purpose (Duncan 1981, Jowitt 1994, Layson 1994, Carter 1998, Blom and Chaplin 2000, Meekums 2005, Grove, Stevens and McKechnie 2005, Tufnel and Crickmay 2006). Artistic dance is inextricably bound to the importance of dancing context (McFee 1992, Layson 1994) in which the attendance of spectators is essential. Keeping in mind this artistic aspect and that dance represents such communication which

includes the choreographer, performers and observers, it can be concluded that, apart from its specific dancing context (McFee 1992, Layson 1994) and its historical development, form and performance (Layson 1994), dance aims to affect aesthetically not only the choreographer and performers, but also the spectators.

However, the aesthetic decisions made by the director, choreographer and dancers that go into the making of a performance, and the subsequent experience of audience and critics of that production, are rarely recognised in political discourse. One reason that the arts gain audiences is because they can offer experiences, values and ideas other than those possible in conventional, political and verbal discourse, and that is at the core of their political importance. Whilst an aesthetic choice is mediated by the experience of the identities, some artists continue to resist the intention to go into the choreographic process with an overly-formed or completely developed idea because they want to be more subtle in confrontation of the dominant discourse and be critical in the way that they represent their identities. For example, Khan (in Grau and Prickett 2002) has argued that creativity can be stifled by hyper-contextualisation. Thus, it is the case that individuality and aesthetic choices are less aligned to nationality than to intuitive processes, but mediated by the experiences of national, religious, ethnic and other identities. Thus, it is important to consider how individuals and collectives perceive dance, meaning that audience responses can be contextualised and interpreted.

A study by Vassilis Sevdalis and Peter Keller (2011) suggests that dance is an effective medium for examining the communication of performer's emotions and



intentions as well as aesthetic qualities of movements. Basic emotions, such as sadness, anger and happiness, expressed in dance can be communicated accurately (Camuri, Lagerlöf and Volpe 2003, de Meijer 1989). Other authors (Stevens, Schubert et al. 2009) found that audience perception of the emotions expressed in dance performance was congruent with choreographer's expressive intentions. Glass (2005) and Stevens, McKechnie et al. (2007) investigated aesthetic experience in dance from the perspective of cognitive-oriented research, revealing interesting factors that affects aesthetic experience of dance. After conducting research on participants who observed contemporary dance, a group of authors (Stevens, Winskel, Howell, Vidal, Milne-Home and Latimer 2009, Glass 2005) identified that numerous factors, such as visual elements, characteristics of dancers, movement, choreography, interpretation, emotional recognition, novelty, spatial/dynamic, intellectual and emotional stimulation and previous experience, affect the aesthetic experience of dance. Concerning cognitive interpretation in dance performances, Glass (2005) suggests that the attribution of meaning involves the spectator's cognitive background, and that is not a specific property of the aesthetic stimulus.

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (see Monk 1990) has noted that the term 'essence', or what may be termed 'universal', is a problematic concept. Rather than saying that an artist emphasises essential traits, it is more effective to argue that an artist emphasises some features which become essential to the work. An artist can deliberately choose to disrupt or subvert the visual system or ignore how the work is perceived, but in composition, they will have made an attempt at creating a perfect stimulus. If the purpose of the choreographer is neutrality, then the elements of the

work such as form, spaces, movements and so on will be used to erase any preference or perceptual bias on the part of the viewer. It can be argued that in attempting to create a 'neutral' space, postcolonial artists bring no specific cultural identity and can 'speak' without predetermined framework of reference/s.

These complex areas of perception and aesthetic experience require investigation in order to enable a reading of the choreographers' work as an artistic practice in its own right, against a background of construed relationships and institutionalised racism. Looking at dance from the viewpoint of identity politics will help to further understand the work, as it will bring together the aesthetic and socio-cultural realms. David Best (1978) has argued that for an art form to count as 'dance', it must have the potential to reveal something important about life issues. What counts as a life issue depends on cultural choices and whether the form that survives is a viable means of expression. For the purposes of this thesis, I assume that a 'life issue' is determined by cultural identities and thus is dependent upon the kinds of cultural choices available to individuals and whether these allow individuals viable means of expression.

### **Developing an approach to Aesthetic Appreciation beyond Eurocentric modes**

Whilst dance is 'borrowing' from social sciences and anthropology, the theory of aesthetics proves problematic in terms of non-Western performance. While histories of art in, for example, India, China, Japan or the Islamic Middle East, have proliferated, their legitimacy has become the object of increasingly hostile comment.

Although the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and the Marxist theorist Terry Eagleton (1990) are coming from different contexts, they both posit that the idea of autonomous aesthetic judgement is a product of Enlightenment ideologies of bourgeois freedom and autonomy. Autonomous aesthetic judgement is consequently alien to most (but not all) non-Western cultures. This area of study has been taken up in more recent art history writings such as Partha Mitter in *Much Maligned Monsters* (1992) who analyses the reaction of Westerners to Indian art and culture from the earliest contact. Mitter highlights that the main problem seems to be that Westerners do not have an appropriate framework to objectively assess and appreciate the pluralist themes and the rich textures that Indian art and culture represent. Hence, artistic practices that initially appear to approximate to the aesthetic concerns of the Western observer are in fact deeply embedded in wider social, political and religious values. Thus, it is fundamental here to consider an aesthetic theory that can be more widely applicable.

Alan Merriam (1964) has critiqued the notion that Western aesthetics could be applied to the cultural products of other world societies. He may have oversimplified the question by choosing as a term of comparison the art theories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as they still survive as the staples of any discourse about art. However, it is my contention that his argument is valid as he notes that all works of art are always historically situated and dependent on 'tradition'. Modes of expression cannot be taken out of context. The dualism inherent within western aesthetics that is problematic for an embodied art form, like dance, has become intermeshed with the historic development of ballet and European and American modern dance. Those dance forms not emanating from a western experience of

embodiment stand in a different relationship to traditional western notions of the aesthetic, and this can have implications for the values attributed to them when presented in the theatres of a European or North American city. However, a current focus in this arena on a phenomenological orientation to the embodied experience of dance suggests shifts in the appreciation of dance that have the potential to allow for different manifestations of the aesthetic (see for example, Smith & Smith 2006, Fraleigh & Hanstein 1999).

The notion that works of art can 'speak' only to those who already understand and share the value system from which they stem is problematic. There are multiple levels of appreciation according to previous knowledge and background. It is possible to aesthetically appraise a dancer's performance in terms of shapes in space and lines of movement in time, but fail to fully understand its merits as a work of art. The difference between aesthetic and artistic appreciation is that artistic appreciation implies knowledge and understanding of the work in context: 'A wide understanding of life becomes centrally important in that the arts can give expressions to a conception of life issues' (Best 1986: 168). Although, in this conception, Best is not considering the context of modernism, he is analysing the impossibility of taking specific instances out of context, and the application of a single methodology or standard to a variety of different cultures and people would be equivalent to the imposition of 'Western' values on non-Western societies.

## **Culturally Specific Aesthetic Appreciation**

Janet Wolff (1975) has proposed that an appreciation of a work of art may be broader than just aesthetic appreciation. A work of art can be appreciated without understanding all of its religious, mythological or symbolic references, but knowledge of these factors can enhance the understanding and appreciation. This rejects the notion that 'art originates in experience, and is the expression of that experience, and which has come to mean that art is aimed at aesthetic experience' (1975: 109). Wolff continues that there is a danger of reducing an experience of a piece of art to abstracted 'aesthetic experience' and this means that the work of art loses 'its place in the world' (ibid: 109): artists (especially those analysed in this thesis) create work that adds to the active values of our own, the remembered values of the past and is a form of individual and self-expression which is shaped by cultural knowledge, which requires a viewer to utilise intuition and reflect upon the work in context. Wolff's argument continues that art is not timeless and universal, but historically and culturally specific. This allows an understanding of how to recognise and make compensations for our own cultural 'baggage' and bias when interpreting work outside our own cultural and historical norm. Wolff proposes that a solution is suggested by Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion of the hermeneutic circle (1975). When we approach a piece of art, we need to be conscious of our own prejudice and be open to the 'otherness' of the material. By controlling our initial anticipations, the viewer is able to alter them, since there is an openness which allows underlying bias to be uncovered (1975: 105).

The 'dangers' of aesthetic theory are that it can become detached, formal and abstract, and there should be an alternative to simply imposing Western standards on non-Western culture. Aesthetic judgements are immediate in something like the way that judgements of colour, or of flavour, are:

We see that a book is red by looking, just as we tell that the tea is sweet by tasting it, So too, it might be said, we just see (or fail to see) that things are delicate, balanced, and the like. This kind of comparison between the exercise of taste and the use of the five sense is indeed familiar; our use of the word 'taste' itself shows that the comparison is age-old and very natural (Sibley 2001: 13-14).

As do dance critics, we offer choices in support of our aesthetic judgements: by appealing to the descriptive properties on which the aesthetic properties depend, we justify aesthetic judgements by bringing others to see what we have seen (Sibley 2001: 14-19). Thus, whilst decisions and judgements are a part of the human condition, when aesthetic theory is employed, equally problematic notions of judgement, beauty and taste inevitably lead to valuations. Ken Wilbur, noting that postmodernist theory implies a denial of hierarchy of value, argues instead for the adoption of the principle of heterarchy:

The fact that actualisation hierarchies involve a ranking of increasing holistic capacity – or even ranking of value – is deeply disturbing to believers of extreme heterarchy, who categorically reject any sort of actual ranking or judgements whatsoever. With very good and often noble reasons...they point out that value ranking is a hierarchical judgement that all too often translates into social oppression and inequality, and that in today's world the more compassionate and just response is a radically egalitarian or pluralistic system – a heterarchy of equal values (2000: 34).

Although I agree with Wilbur in part, he does not perhaps fully recognise how humans experience the complexity of performance. Eldritch Priest (2005) argues that when we perceive an art work we tend to rank elements we think are important and significant, and thereby establish a 'sense' of coherence, even if subjectively, to the work. This could include new, innovative and experimental aesthetics, which are about subverting a symbolically and historically mediated art experience by highlighting new choices and connections. A complex experimental aesthetic is different in the sense that it can disrupt the actual nature of hierarchies; hierarchies need not be rigid, but can be all embracing. A ranking of particular features can seem perfectly acceptable in one context, but is simultaneously part of another context. Heterarchy (a concept established by Gilles Deleuze 1969, republished 1990) is the level of differential values at play, while hierarchy is the integrative principle that makes complex exclusive discriminations between these values.

Artists create art which reflect the skills, knowledge and personalities of their makers, along with their social and political values. The work succeeds or fails in realising the aims of the artists creating the work. Works of art can be interpreted in different ways, understood, misunderstood, subjected to analysis, acclaimed or criticised. The very language in which analysis is conducted and the concepts which are used to inform interpretation derive from culturally located practices in art (Adshead 1988). Although there are many kinds of value that works of art may possess, their distinctive value is their value as art. The character of a work of art endows it with greater or lesser degree of this distinctive value. When one views a dance performance with an interest to making it marketable and/or promotable, issues of saleability mean that the conception is not related directly to dance as an artwork. It

is not concerned with the concepts of aesthetic or artistic interest (which could account for the frustrations that the artists/companies included have with the labelling and understanding of their work within the public arena). Thus, dance is not seen as art, which invites concepts related to aesthetic and artistic appreciation, but pertains to 'purposive interests' (McFee 1994: 14). It is then up to the spectator (who may also have been influenced by the writing of critics), according to their knowledge, understanding and interest, to activate their perception in order to approach the dance work with concepts such as form, style and meaning, which are concepts appropriate to the appreciation of art. Most important in understanding the work of the artists/companies in this thesis is to also to include the concepts of identity and cultural politics.

## **Aesthetics and Politics**

Aesthetic production, Fredric Jameson posits (1991: 4-5), is now increasingly important to commodity production. Markets, in this sense, treat arts and culture like 'information', the basic unit of the globalised world. Markets, however, do a poor job of representing the true value of artistic and cultural expression. Jameson argues that performance-based arts tend to be less valued than arts that can be mass-produced. The ephemerality of performance, its tendency towards disappearance as Peggy Phelan (1993) also points out, is at the heart of its cultural value, but it is also this quality that sets in motion all the forces that seek to place, name and contain it. It is at this point that performance becomes a product, a commodity which is much easier to track in terms of impact of change. As will be shown in the following chapter, ACE policies are about strategically developing the arts; raising participation



and audience numbers and how these can be achieved through various dance projects; and funding is allocated to promote particular kinds of work, artists and companies. Many cultural expressions have no transactive value at all, but are necessary to the functions of a community or people. The culture industries may value a certain amount of diversity of expression; the demand for new sensations never ceases. But in the marketplace, expressions that enhance social status via scarcity or facilitate the sale of other commodities add the most value. Jeff Chang writes that 'expressions with strong non-market values must also be protected and promoted, and the aim of cultural policy should be to counterbalance market pressures' (2008: 8). It is imperative equal opportunities and artistic rights are provided, with access to the tools of creativity being broadened in order to close new gaps between the cultural elite and the cultural underclass.

Thomas DeFrantz (2005) has argued that some African American choreographers seek to create aesthetic sites that allow Black Americans to participate in discourses of recognition and appreciation to include concepts of 'beauty'. He suggests that 'beauty' may produce social change for the viewers, and that interrogating the notion of 'beauty' may bring about social change among audiences that include dance theorists and philosophers. Using DeFrantz's ideas and transposing it to British work, I believe that the work of Khan, Jeyasingh, Khoo, Phoenix, Lawal and Hylton can help audiences to image alternative ways of doing and being, if 'beauty' can exist in a range of alternative performances and dance forms. DeFrantz contests that the meaning assigned to movement depends on a number of factors: the vocabularies or symbol sets taken to be available; the set supposed to be actually in use; the way the mover is taken to be using the set of options; the context; the other variables

attached to human communication. In this way, the artists/companies work is valorised as its inherent 'beauty' realised.

Aesthetics are shaped by local contemporary social and political influences. The aesthetics of modernism and postmodernism in the dance work of these postcolonial artists/companies may be evaluated by the degree to which they have emancipated themselves from the ideological structures of their own past, but these choreographers demand to be evaluated by the degree to which their considered and inherited past has been both diversified and integrated into a vision of the present and future. In this thesis I aim to provide recognition to the aesthetic and political intent within the work of the artists/companies. Larry Lavender has proposed that it is possible to discuss and analyse a dance work in terms of its 'objective properties' (2001: 96); but in order to do so, one must recognise that every dance form has a very special set of aesthetic codes that are appropriate to its specificity. Unfortunately, it has already been noted in this introduction that dance critics do not always recognise these aesthetic codes (or indeed, assume that they fully understand these codes) and I have critiqued the use of language and understanding. In the case studies to follow the understanding of aesthetics and politics put forward here will be applied in order to analyse the culturally specific dance forms utilised.

## Identity Politics

'Identity politics' has come to signify a wide range of political activity and theorising founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups. Thus, formations typically aim to secure the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalised within its larger context, by asserting their distinctiveness, with the goal of greater self-determination. Within multicultural Britain, Black and Asian artists are seen, labelled and categorised by their features first, but they cannot afford to be seen only in this way if they want to be seen as equal and comparable to other British 'mainstream' artists. Dance fashions the politics of belonging and is a tool in shaping nationalist ideology. So, it is my aim to appreciate the ways in which choreography and performance work by the chosen artists/companies translates these tensions, negotiations and dialogues within the British context. Identity politics can also be problematic and this is will be discussed below.

Political activity is animated by efforts to define and defend who I am, or we are, or you are, or hope to be, or to be seen to be<sup>6</sup>. By extension, it is motivated by our imagination of what is or ought to be mine or ours or yours. Jamie Frueh has written that, 'each self/other antinomy carries implications for power whenever it is invoked, and if its invocation is systematised into social rules, it becomes political' (2003: 29). However, it is not only about self-government. Nor does it always involve much in the way of public debate; it is about the always unfinished enterprise of self-construction and self-presentation. The reason is that politics involves making comparisons and

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<sup>6</sup> This is the premise put forward by Richard Parker (1994), arguing that political activity is an effort to express and defend identity.

choices among, and commitments to, values and interests and groups and individuals. The choices and the commitments we make in politics are ones which we meant to, by which we cannot help but, identify ourselves. Politics involves comparison, choice and commitment under conditions of conflict.

An issue with identity politics is that it tends to portray and purvey differences and grievances (rather than similarities and bonds) among groups and individuals. Such diagnoses are wrong because they seem not to recognise and understand the value of identity politics. Of course, identity politics is self-regarding as it is about the construction and presentation of oneself (which should matter to everyone), which can account for the energy and motivation of many dance artists to promote their difference, fuelled by a motivation of self-determination and self-assertion.

One of the more problematic identities in today's identity politics is the identification of a group not in terms of a trait such as race or ethnicity or sexual orientation, but as a 'minority' group, and worse the identification of an individual 'member' of such a group as a 'minority'. The banality of the label blinds us to the significance.

Compared with more concrete identity categories, the greater abstraction and ambiguity of 'minority', even of 'disadvantaged minority' or 'discrete and insular minority', creates even greater leeway for political manipulation and discipline.

Though somewhat extreme, it could be read that ACE enforces definitions of 'minorities' and their 'members' (consider Naseem Khan's report *The Arts Britain Ignores* analysed further in Chapter 1) in order to promote a certain kind of 'British'

dance as it promotes and funds certain work over others and keeps some artists and companies 'inside' and others on the margins; it provides a 'structure of opportunity'.

Political debate invariably becomes reduced to binary terms, the arbitrary form of cultural politics. The 'in between' space (as put forward by Bhabha) is one with the potential to disrupt the political code, by re-consideration of the binaries. Christopher Bannerman has argued that 'in some ways, the identity question may also be seen as a reaction to and/or against globalisation and mobility: the search for a fixed point from which to make sense of the greater availability of choice for many in questions of location, grounding and home' (2011, n.p). In his paper for *Cultural Diversity in the Arts*, Bhabha argues that the borderline artist's identity is 'crafted from the experience of social displacement' (1993: 23). With political campaigns in this country ever evolving, immigrants can find themselves constantly in the process of negotiating their identities, irrespective of whether they belong to a first, second or third generation of immigrants. Bhabha concludes that we fall into the performance of identity as iteration. Jeyasingh, for example, is an Indian woman raised on British pop music, who quotes Edward Said and Salman Rushdie. Thus, it would be hard to answer simply who she is iterating, because the range of influences comes from very different cultures. Pam Nilan and Carles Feixa point out that:

Perhaps the most interesting thing about the widespread academic perception that contemporary young people inhabit *plural* worlds is, that as far as most youth are concerned, they only inhabit one, highly complex 'world'. What may not seem only contradictory identity discourses to an older generation often do not seem so to youth, who pull upon a pastiche of sources in this local creative practices (2006: 2).

When identity is used in political activity within various social movements for self-determination, it becomes representative of the particular social group, who usually unite around common experiences of actual or perceived social injustice. A visible example is the black nationalists in the UK during the 1960s and 70s, who do not only argue that 'Black people' are (or at least should be) a community, but they are a community with a historical political struggle (Carr 2002, Draper 1971). When united they believe that they can actually be a cohesive political force against racism and claim that their own agency lies outside of white controlled movements. Thus, identity politics are synonymous to, but not equatable with, the concepts of white skin privilege, self-determination and self-definition. This issue is also important as we realise that agency requires positionality in order to be able to compete and gain status, not only in daily life but also within the field of dance. For example, as will be highlighted in Chapter 3, Kathak and Bharata Natyam are popular dance practices in India, which can be read as resistance to the colonial legacy and as recuperation of the precolonial past. Thus, my analysis of the artists/companies' use of aesthetics is historically and culturally specific and will need to consider that the dance form that is being utilised within the chosen work has a very special set of aesthetic codes that are appropriate to its specificity. An example where identity politics is going to be particularly relevant is with Phoenix; founded at a time of race riots and politicised art, the company refused the label 'black dance', startling sections of the black arts movement and ACE by insisting on being described as a contemporary dance company. The company was expected to conform to what ACE considered to be the 'norm' in spite of the fact that the company's origins, audience and remit was not

‘normative’, which effectively turned it into a site of struggle between established and new notions of Britishness and ways of being.

### **‘Mainstream’ dance in Britain and ‘conventional aesthetics’**

Artists/companies such as those included for analysis argue for the inclusion into the ‘mainstream’ dance sector. Here, ‘mainstream’ tends to mean Western, European and predominantly white; implicitly presuming itself wholly unified and homogenous. However, it is necessary to recognise that the category of ‘mainstream’ is more complex and cannot simply be conflated with whiteness. Due to its conflation with whiteness though, the term ‘mainstream’ tends to be banded about and can almost feel abusive since it is used by those who feel excluded from it. For some, the ‘mainstream’ is located in a relationship of some degree of comfort with the establishment, and productive of a kind of awkwardness or lack in those who do not or cannot participate in it. Bharata Natyam in India for example, enjoys national acclaim within the specific cultural scenarios and, supported by government policies and then seen by the West as directly representative of that community’s preferred aesthetics. As Bharata Natyam and other forms are ‘accepted’ into some notion of the ‘official’ culture, problematic hierarchies are created. Hegemonic notions of ‘Tradition’ are formulated, which tend to even out differences among ‘local’ practices, and create a hierarchical cultural scene. Such practices constitute another kind of mainstream, mobilising legitimisation through invocations of ‘tradition’ and ‘culture’. Thus, ‘mainstream’ can mean different things in different contexts.

Non-white artists want to be recognised as equal, whilst still different and individual, and want a fair share of the already limited resources in Britain. The demand for 'recognition' from non-white communities is seen in Brenda Dixon Gottschild's thesis (1996) that black performance and art forms have been a constant presence in American culture, entering the mainstream through subterranean influences as well as conscious borrowings, mostly unacknowledged, from the choreography of Balanchine, the Cubism of Picasso, to the 'cool' attitude of post-modern choreographers.

It has been acknowledged that there is a 'problem' with how mainstream British dance critics write about the work of dance artists/companies of colour, making work that incorporates the techniques and concepts of 'other' cultures. Here, I take 'mainstream dance critics' to mean those that are familiar with high culture dance forms such as ballet and modern dance, who generally have not been 'responsible' to world cultural practices. Of course, with deconstruction theory, Afrocentricity, and related new developments for example, this has forced change. Although discussing the American context and written some time ago, its applicability to the British context today is clear, as Gottschild argues:

I look back at the reviews that I wrote even ten years ago and see how I, too, evaluated African-American modern dance groups using Europeanist criteria as the sole frame of reference...I was raised and programmed to recognise only one stream – conveniently tagged as the mainstream – even though our American context and the dances we critique represent multiple currents (Gotschild in Desmond 1997: 175).



This is particularly significant since Gottschild has written extensively about the African American influence on American culture, and in particular dance practices, so it is shocking that she would utilise Europeanist criteria. It seems that there are those artists who still believe that they are working 'on the margins' and, for example, the Natya Kala Conference in 2000 focused on the story of 'how a handful of dancers' unfunded and with little support mechanism, set up a movement that now commands mainstream stages in the UK'. It has also been noted that since Naseem Khan's paper 'The Arts that Britain ignores' in 1976, a few dancers and a handful of Asian and non-Asian votaries were seized with a vision to take 'heritage' arts beyond the immediate community and make artistic space for Indian dance within the mainstream. The development of institutions such as the Academy of Indian Arts and subsidised national tours of large-scale dance productions were the hallmarks of the decade. By the 1990s, funded Dance in Education and Community Dance (where the community is not necessarily Indian) as well as national tours for select companies became the norm. Indian dance had developed a multifaceted reflection of cultural inheritance and artistic independence and an array of professional support organisations. However, all dancers in the diaspora have had to address the tendency of their new countries to place their dance in a foreign or 'ethnic' category, with the Western mainstream excluding it from its own frame of reference and always seeing it as 'other'. In 2007, Akosua Boakye-Nimo, Head of Performing Arts at Kensington and Chelsea College, acknowledged that whilst Britain is rich in cultural diversity and heritage and this is reflected in various industries including fashion and music, but not equally in dance. Dance is a highly competitive industry, some of the world's most renowned dance training centres including Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) offer students a wide range of accredited

vocational courses teaching dance techniques such as ballet, Jazz and contemporary dance through a range of progression routines. Talking specifically about African dance, Boakye-Nimo noted that this form does not feature in these programmes for a variety of reasons: 'funding for development, accessibility, and skills shortage' (2007, n.p). It is argued that the range of dance techniques taught in the 'mainstream dance institutions are dominated by western dance forms' and do not 'address equality in opportunity' for other dance forms, 'nor do they reflect the multicultural society we are a part of in Britain' (ibid).

In 1999, Chris Smith, then the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport acknowledged that:

Cultural professionals should be aware of how narrowly based their own interpreters of history can be...They need to both employ people with a wider vision and undertake projects that focus on missing history...I want to see organisations working in this field – I would put this very strongly – providing a more complete version of the truth (1999, n.p).

What is significant about this statement is that Smith has realised that there is something missing from dominant British history. It has been commonly acknowledged in theoretical discourse that what has been taught as art and dance history is racially constructed in favour of the white race and at the expense of those who are not (which is why the work of dance theorists such as Gottschild (1998, 2005), for example, has been so important and influential). Artist, Rasheed Araeen (2010), has argued that cultural policies which have described people as 'Black and minority ethnic artists' has separated those who are seen to be different from the

indigenous white people of Britain and led to the division of society of two different discourses: one for the dominant white majority whose creativity is believed self-generated without outside help; and the other for the non-white minority, defined racially or ethnically, who must be told to be creative. Thus, the former becomes part of the mainstream history, while the latter must linger at the margins to reinforce the white centrality of society.

Thus, whilst there is now greater 'tolerance' and acceptance of a diversity of dance forms and a multicultural approach to art and dance, there are still underlying assumptions and dispositions that continue to be held as part of the embodied ideology of the aesthetic. For example, there continues to be a hierarchy which places particular dance forms as superior to others. Western European dance forms have typically been identified as the superior forms, which are historically situated within a structure dominated by men or a masculine paradigm. Clearly, this is quite simplistic, but the powerful effect of globalisation means that differences are being erased and a homogenous cultural space is being imposed (see Shapiro 2008). Western culture and other forms which have managed to become global and desired (for example, Hip Hop and Ballet) become pleasurable and the obvious means of expression. The global media has far more control over what youths are exposed to in terms of dance, than the 'official' dance world has, for example Yasser Mattar (although discussing hip hop culture in general, but its applicability to this discussion is clear) has written that 'the internet facilitates interaction among hip hop consumers and helps promote commonalities in issues discussed, knowledge of hip hop community current events, and language patterns' (Mattar 2003: 284). The

discomfort with those who are different and 'other' to us, provides a challenge to dance within the complexity of achieving diversity within unity.

As there has been a growing 'TV dance boom' over the last few years, we have seen contemporary dance becoming part of the mainstream as the growing popularity of prime time TV shows such as 'So you think you can dance?' ('the search for Britain's favourite dancer') featuring choreography by the likes of Rafael Bonachela, Mark Baldwin, Henri Oguike, Matthew Bourne and Kate Prince. Bonachela, for example, a respected classically trained dancer who has worked with Kylie Minogue, created the sexually charged 'bed dance' on the programme which gained much attention. Since then, Bonachela has noted that his company has noticed a rise in ticket sales: 'the fact that I had a full theatre instead of an empty theatre is a good sign...TV has great power. But it has limitations. Sometimes, reality shows are about people's lives and dramas, more that about their talent' (Bonachela in Groskop 2010). Thus, it is no wonder that some of Bonachela's fellow choreographers will not take on work such as this, fearing that their work will be diluted or they would be dictated to. Very simplistically, perhaps being a part of the mainstream is about establishing oneself and being an obvious part of the cultural landscape and as 'valid' in the eyes of their peers. Therefore, whilst artists such as Siobhan Davies, Richard Alston, Hofesh Shechter and the artists above, may be easily categorised as a part of the mainstream contemporary dance sector, artists such as Jonathon Burrows, Xavier Le Roy and La Ribot are seen as experimental, as their focus may be seen more about artist development, experimentation, research and the creation of new and

exciting dance and movement works, which may naturally spill into experimental theatre and live art, and be more 'challenging' for audiences<sup>7</sup>.

Whilst there may be postcolonial artists/companies working on the margins of the mainstream whose work will never be classified as such, there are some, such as Khan and Phoenix who have succeeded. However, there are questions surrounding the possibility of them ever becoming avant-garde or experimental and whether they actually want to do this. This does suggest however, that diversity, therefore, is disruptive as it can upset the norm, which must somehow be governed so that the mainstream culture can function undisturbed by a threat of 'difference' from the inside. The postcolonial Other, in its various forms of ethnic, racial, cultural or political otherness, is happy to be inside the system (and 'mainstream') in whatever it entails.

Thus, it is part of my central argument that British South Asian dancers have to negotiate their artistic freedom and their identity – primarily as dancers, but also as South Asians (see Grau 2002: 44-50). In Britain, the 'South Asianness' is not only predicated on skin colour, gender and sexuality, and class (which in Britain obliterates caste), but also religious affiliation (primarily Hindu, Muslim and Sikh). This contrived socio-political and cultural 'South Asianness' superimposed on the other identities, masks underlying tensions. Alessandra Lopez y Royo has argued

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<sup>7</sup> Knut Arntzen has written that 'In European and American arts and theatre mainstream has been used as a concept to describe a general development of something being widely consumed and trendsetting... Experimental mainstream could be conceived of as when non conventional theatre produced in mainstream areas like Western Europe or the United States, has become a trendsetter of new theatre developments in general' (1998, n.p).

that Indian dance classicism in the contemporary Indian context has become increasingly entangled with the dominant Hindu discourse (2003: 159-164), which has meant that in Britain, South Asian dancers strive to avoid such an entanglement. The terms of the often violent Indian debate on religious identity are perceived with discomfort by dancers in their diasporic British context, as somewhat irrelevant and be bracketed off, not to be discussed in a public arena: if South Asian dance is to be mainstream, then it has to be uncompromisingly secular, in the western sense of being totally separate from religion. Lopez y Royo (2004) has reiterated that being mainstream means to disassociate theatre dance from community dance, which reflects ethnicity and religious allegiance and to establish South Asian dance as a professional pursuit.

Even though Professor of Dance Studies, Jo Butterworth, has argued that in the twentieth century, 'mainstream dance has often looked to "other" cultures to enrich its language, whether in terms of European-American modern dance from non-Western dance cultures, or simply from one style of dance to another' (2009: 249), many artists feel that they are excluded from a British 'mainstream'. There are issues with access for artists from clusters within British society; African, Asian, Oceanic, people with disabilities and other minorities may feel excluded from working within mainstream opera, classical ballet and a contemporary dance mainstream, and access for the communities of these same peoples may feel alienated from productions at Sadler's Wells, Royal Opera House, English National and other mainstream venues. Josette Bushell-Mingo, actress and co-founder of Push, a multi-disciplinary Black-led arts organisation with the aim of inspiring diversity and promoting more Black artists within the mainstream British arts sector, believes that

this alienation is a result of mainstream venues seemingly limited amount of work for which these communities can feel an empathy for or ownership of. The push to be 'mainstream' is sustained through organisations such as the Association of Dance of the African Diaspora (ADAD), which aims to move Dance of the African Diaspora from the margins to the mainstream<sup>8</sup>. Further, the lobbying of South Asian dance organisations have been set up to cater to the needs of a growing South Asian dance profession; Akademi (an organisation actively promoting and supporting artists working with South Asian dance techniques in Britain) 'works to bring people in contact with the creativity of South Asian dance as a part of mainstream dance in Britain'<sup>9</sup>.

Whilst, for example, Jeyasingh has been incorporated into the British mainstream dance sector, the work is not 'conventional'<sup>10</sup>, whereas Phoenix can be read as 'conventional' as they use contemporary dance technique as the primary style in the work. Raymond Williams, in his conception of 'conventional aesthetics' has argued that works of art (he was speaking specifically about literary works, but there are wider implications) produce 'structures of feeling', not 'pictures of reality' (1977: 132-4). The politics of art therefore result from a politicised understanding of the ways in which the judgement of taste is shaped by hegemonic norms of interpretation, where the common sense of an historical period supplies, at the unconscious level, a

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<sup>8</sup> The work, aims and objectives of ADAD are described on their website:  
<http://www.adad.org.uk/metadot/index.pl>

<sup>9</sup> The work, aims and objectives of Akademi are described on their website:  
<http://www.akademi.co.uk/whoweare/index.php>

<sup>10</sup> Avanthi Meduri has written that 'If and when the British Indian/South Asian dancer/teacher understands and accepts her double voiced paradoxical incorporation into British mainstream culture and dance production, she is inserted into a global dance milieu and empowered to embrace flexible notions of dance citizenship and present herself strategically as British-Indian and British-Asian simultaneously in the world at large' (2013: 180)

typology of judgments that delimits possible constructions of subjectivity that potentially defied conventional identities and commonsensical evaluations of works (ibid). But this penetrating insight, so different from subsequent efforts to direct a politicisation of aesthetics through cognitive forms of ideology critique, was only cashed out by Williams in terms of 'residual', 'dominant' and 'emergent' cultural structures (1980: 31-49). The linear and progressive notion of history implied these categories credit a politicisation of aesthetics to the conceptual framework of a philosophy of history, which is driven by an historical teleology that is no longer credible. Jameson and Williams are amongst some theorists who have argued that it is not only in the light of some conception of a dominant cultural logic or hegemonic norm that genuine difference can be measured and assessed. In attempting to classify the 'postmodern', Williams has termed 'residual' and 'emergent' forms of cultural production as the very different kinds of cultural impulses. If a general sense of a cultural dominant is achieved (as is attempted in the work of Phoenix through the use of contemporary dance technique), then we fall back into a view of history as sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectiveness is undecideable; Phoenix are unable to fully be part of the mainstream because of their 'genuine difference' (their ethnicity and cultural heritage) that is continually highlighted.

## **Introduction: Conclusion**

The arts, including dance, can reflect, reinforce, prompt, challenge, as well as be appropriated in the quest for identity. They are never politically 'innocent': they operate in dialogue with both exclusive and inclusive ideologies. Thus, it has been



demonstrated in this chapter that there is a problematic between the relation between aesthetics and identities. As Best (1975) has argued, there is no general aesthetic experience and/or any creative processes which are inherent to all the arts and specifically dance. However, what is nevertheless key to my investigation is the specificity of the artists/companies' aesthetics and the ideologies behind their artistic choices. The emergence of anthropology as a scientific discipline in the mid-nineteenth century, parallel with aesthetic criticism's elevation of dance as an art form and tensions in experimentation with the form, expanded a Western idea of dance to non-Western cultures and societies, often treating dance practices as folk traditions<sup>11</sup>. There has been harmful ethnocentric tendencies in some dance research, but there have been major contributions to the assessment and development of anthropological approaches to human movement in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and into the 1990s include Gertrude Prokosch Kurath (1986), Anya Peterson Royce (1977), Helen Thomas (1995) and Judith Lynne Hanna (1979, 1983) which has generated different categories of analysis and new questions. It also becomes possible to recognise the way Western values and desires are imposed on non-Western dance forms. Such possibilities are the subtext of the discussions of the case studies in this thesis.

Chapter 1 considers the relation between postcolonial theory and cultural policy to assess whether cultural policy can articulate an oppositional stance against an increasingly commercial and superficial society and fight for the values of 'others'. It will be demonstrated in Chapter 1 that the expectations of cultural policies and

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<sup>11</sup> Franz Boas, A.R. Radcliffe Brown and E.E. Evans-Pritchard did include social dancing, ceremonies and rituals in their field studies.

dominant critical discourses favour British Asian and Afro-Caribbean dancers who are pushing boundaries in terms of dance; innovation and creativity is celebrated. However, this hybrid work is usually recognisably informed by western aesthetics and performance standards, which means that western ideologies about aesthetics remain unchallenged. While dance forms identified with specific cultures are staged for British and international audiences, the same dance forms might be interpreted and invested with new meaning within the home culture. Chapter 2 sets up the methodological framework for analysis, with postcolonialism being seen as both an effect and a reading strategy. In order to have a full understanding of the context in which postcolonial artists operate and make work, a genealogical interrogation of modernism, postmodernism, classicism, 'tradition' and reconstruction is carried out with consideration for Eurocentric bias and ideological construction. Chapter 3 and 4 examine the context of British South Asian and Black British dance, before analysing the choreographic strategies, individual performance qualities and artistic decisions in the chosen case studies. These two chapters aim to demonstrate the disruptive effects that these artists/companies can have to the normative ideologies of white Western dance.

## **Chapter 1**

The ideologies of a society are revealed through numerous forms of social interaction. The arts (dance being a core component of this) hold great importance within society and contribute to social identity. Representations of identity within dance are revelatory about hegemonic ideologies and the critical study of ideology pertains to cultural production. Thus, there is an argument that dance forms need identities for political representation, yet these can, and often do, become stifling for the artists creating work. It is necessary to consider the relation between postcolonial theory and cultural policy to assess whether cultural policy can in fact, articulate an oppositional stance against an increasingly commercial and superficial society and fight for the values of 'others'. This chapter will also see an examination of cultural policy in Britain which guides financial support for dance and the performing arts and how this has developed over time. In order to understand how to contextualise dance, it is necessary to understand the overall political environment within which dance operates. Resource dependency within part of the dance field makes it vulnerable to political change, policy shifts and changes to the funding levels and regimes upon which they rely.

### **Postcolonial theory and cultural policy**

Postcolonialism is a contentious term, but generally deals with 'questions of nationhood, cultural identity and hybridity; the effects of and responses to diaspora; a questioning of inherited and colonial-influenced historical narratives and essentialised descriptions of race' (Featherstone 2005: 7). Some dance scholars have drawn on postcolonial theory, in particular the work of Homi Bhabha (1994) to

investigate dancers of colour who are working beyond cultural definition (the dancer whose orientation and view of the world profoundly transcends his/her indigenous culture is developing from the complex of social, political, economic and educational interactions), but who are bound by the parameters of cultures, and thus are constantly negotiating cultural borders, social identities and embodied realities in movement (Mitra 2005, Jeyasingh 1998).

Cultural politics can be understood in terms of the ability to represent the world and to make particular descriptions stick. Thus, social change is possible through rethinking and re-describing the social order and the possibilities for the future. All forms of cultural representation are intrinsically political because they are bound with the power that enables some kinds of knowledge and identities to exist while denying it to others. Thus, postcolonial theory is a way of deconstructing and de-mystifying by highlighting the constructed nature of culture. By using postcolonial theory to understand and make sense of cultural policy, it is possible to highlight the myths and ideologies embedded in policy in the hope of producing subject positions, and real subjects, who are enabled to oppose subordination. Deconstructing policies and artists' response/s to them, helps to understand how they work and in particular to be aware of their political implications. It is about being linked to communities, groups, organisations and networks of people and artists who are actively engaged in social and cultural change, and to provide an account of the inequalities perpetuated not only through the distribution of resources, but also through colonial modes of representation.

Commonly reckoned, cultural policy is a post-war phenomenon, with the British Arts Council, established in 1946, as the starting point. However, cultural policy cannot be an issue solely for government and public administration, but must be countervailed by 'the public sphere', the famous concept taken from Habermas' book *The structural transformation of the public sphere* (1962). Jim McGuigan was explicit: 'Fundamental...is the normative view that, in a democratic society, 'the public will', however that is understood and constructed, should decisively influence the conditions of culture, their persistence and their potential for change' (1996: 22). However, as postcolonialism highlights, there are power structures and hierarchies of people. Thus, Michel Foucault's analysis of power (1977, 1980), conceives of itself as leaving the overarching perspective in order to dive deeply into the mechanisms of power. By using concepts as 'micro power' or 'bio power' he suggests that it is possible to grasp the kind of governmentality that permeates any given society. Foucault argues that power is everywhere, rather than radiating from a distinct centre subjugating the whole of society. The problem with this view is that it tends to make the power anonymous. It should be possible to point out certain agents, groups, elites and classes as considerably more powerful than others; to clarify the manner in which the spheres are linked to one another and, to understand how the balance of interests is, temporarily, fixed, it will be possible to discern the relations of domination between the spheres. And as cultural policy is fit into the totality, the critical analysis of it requires postcolonial theory in this case. It will help to juxtapose and make sense of the instrumentalism and marketisation of politics in general and cultural policy in particular.

Global capitalism is accompanied by an unequally global cultural imperialism, the common centre of which rests in Western Europe and the US. The cultural politics outlined and implemented in the former colonial powers is embedded in the political and economic structure which is the historical legacy of the colonial epoch. Many intricate ideological presumptions, political connections and economic interests, which often are taken for granted, are lurking beneath the surface, just waiting to be disclosed and scrutinised.

Dance represents an intelligent expression of human experience, and is an important source of understanding that contributes to our cognitive, emotional and physical growth within multicultural settings. Dance and the performative are not politically neutral, but are inscribed in political discourse; Randy Martin writes that 'while dance is neither language nor politics; it is clarified and qualified through these means' (1998: 5). Thus it is necessary to understand and relate politics to the dance work being produced and to ensure that the language used is sophisticated and appropriate. Further, Martin writes that:

An effective dance study, would expose both a political specificity and an entire political horizon. Such horizons, with their promise to enlarge the sense of what is possible, generally lost in daily experience to the enormous scale of society, are thereby condensed and made palpable. Hence mobilisation in dance, because it is overdetermined, does not simply reflect the politics outside it but displays as well the activity of participation that is constitutive of the political field as a field replete with myriad practices (ibid: 14).

Although Martin is talking about dance studies, it is my submission that the choreographers chosen for analysis, are able to achieve what Martin describes

above: to display and expose the cultural politics of today's Britain through their choreography and performance style. Yet the choreographers also provide alternative articulations of politics and subversion of policy. The interrelated nature of the arts and politics has gained media attention of late. Indra Adnan observes:

If British politics could find a way to formally embrace the messages emerging from our burgeoning culture, from the radical ideas of our national playwrights to the new demands of those engaged at the grass roots in the culture of identity – without seeking to control them – it would effectively open up British politics to the possibility of change. In fact, if properly pursued, such a commitment constitutes change itself (2007, n.p).

Thus, dance plays a role in articulating perceptions, including self-perceptions of cultural identity. For example, after gaining political independence, the postcolonial governments of Asian countries such as India have used dance as part of a nation building programme, projecting an unchanging, essentialised vision of tradition, culture, identity and community deep into the past (Iyer 1997). Changing definitions of 'home' affect the content and even the form of dance and its point of reference, with changes determined by challenges in a new and constantly self redefining social context and new audiences' expectations. Those changes are produced through a process of negotiation. For artists who now see Britain as their 'home', they have become entangled in the political questions and debates over multiculturalism, cultural diversity and 'Britishness', and therefore need to consider the objectives set by funders. The choreographic and performance work that is produced, therefore, reveals the dynamism and inconsistencies of living in Britain.

Naseem Khan highlights the ongoing question that the ACE still asks: 'What is the right balance between policy that responds and policy that leads?' (2006: 26). The Commission for Racial Equality paper (2002) asks: 'Does Cultural diversity funding lead to good art or mediocrity?' and gives personal experiences from Bonnie Greer (American-British playwright, novelist and critic) and Jeyasingh. The Commission raises the question of whether cultural diversity policies are responding to political agendas rather than artistic ones. Greer writes that 'a cultural policy can shape the collective expression of the nation at whatever level it chooses. The danger and mistake would be to think that art can emerge from government policy' (2002, np). It is true that government policy is not deterministic, but it can create an environment which leads us to make assumptions and to have certain expectations, which does not allow people to view art with a neutral and open perspective. In turn, it could be argued that ACE policies that follow the government policies, have led black artists in the past to focus too much on creating work that explores identity. Arts policy suggests that the people are more important than the particular dance form or intention, aesthetic or artistry. Forms and ideas from 'other' dance cultures have been tolerated, but shaped into the British dance canon, whilst the aesthetic values have slipped beneath the radar.

### **Cultural Diversity Policies and their effects on Arts Funding in Britain**

Cultural policy is central to shaping and transforming, not only attitudes and daily behaviours, but also dance. Consequently, it is necessary to examine cultural policy and how it shapes the lives of those living in Diaspora. Although one could argue that it has always been important to have an awareness of one's own identity, the



increasing concern in the field of cultural policy is to ensure the diversity of the population is represented which means that greater focus and attention has been placed on the representation of the population in recent times.

Since the 1980s, there have been political questions and debates about multiculturalism and 'Britishness'. Multiculturalism as a term is used in three distinct senses: as a description of the state of cultural diversity as a society, as an ideology aimed at legitimising the incorporation of ethnic diversity in the general structure of society, or as public policy designed to create national unity in ethnic diversity (Kallen 1982). In much of the discussion surrounding the term 'multicultural', cultural difference is the central problematic. The problem of governance in multicultural societies is then about how cultural difference is to be accommodated in a single political order. Thus, studies on multiculturalism (see Friesen 1993, Malik 1996), on the one hand, have mainly been concerned with public policies aimed at the inclusion of migrant populations into a culturally more or less homogenous nation-state. The multicultural population in Britain has meant that debates about the representation of its 'other' voices have had to be considered. Multiculturalism results from the genuine desire of the immigrant communities to maintain their own cultural roots and assert themselves culturally through these forms. But this has played into the hands of the establishment as a means to impose its own agenda of cultural diversity, which would not end in the recognition of the historical struggles of African or Asian people in Britain for equality but in the emergence of cultural spectacles whose purpose is merely to provide exotic entertainment (see Araeen 2010). The popular perception of ethnic groups (a perception that has been raised to the status of theory by some researchers such as Heath et al. 2013), is that they

have long, continuous, often glorious histories of cultural distinctiveness which confer to them the rights of 'a people' which means that their 'culture' (a 'tradition') becomes an object, tool or even commodity. In extreme cases, the 'tradition' may even be a fabrication or invention, either from remnants of the past, from disparate local cultures and traditions, or from a stipulation of contemporary culture or social situation as representative of the past.

### **Cultural Policy in Britain: Trajectories of policy shifts**

In 1981, Ken Livingstone was elected to the Greater London Council (GLC). This elected body had a Labour-Left majority when the country was in the grip of a Thatcher Conservative government, and 'sought to mobilise people usually excluded by the formal political process, and to organise them in informal ways combining participatory democracy and representative government' (Bahl 1996). Money was made available to previously marginalised groups, multicultural education was promoted, and many new dance companies emerged (for example, Adzido began in 1984) that broke away from the mainstream of ballet and contemporary dance and/or celebrated a variety of African or Asian heritages. During the 1980s, a number of key agencies and individuals (such as ADiTi and Akademi) worked tirelessly to establish a South Asian dance ecology which included work from both a heritage perspective and work that reflected a contemporary UK Asian identity. In terms of 'Black Dance' in the UK too, companies such as Adzido, Kokuma and Badejo Arts reached a peak in the 1980s. This meant that there was a greater access to such companies and encouraged people to learn movement characteristic of African dance. During this

time, a forum for Black Dance in Britain was established which contributed to the recognition of African dance as a social facility.

Patricia Hoffbauer (2004) (Grau 1990, 1992 has also provided a critique) recognised that multiculturalism as a concept and a practice was not without problems:

Multiculturalism, in its critique of the western canon and revision of the Eurocentric doctrine has affected the arts community as a whole. By pushing beyond aesthetic and formal questions, multicultural politics expanded ideological and formal disciplinary borders and re-defined dance differently. Multicultural artists began to mesh their work with personal narratives; fearlessly wearing their racial and social location on their bodies, dancers, performance artists and choreographers of colour started to make work about race, sexual, gender and ethnic identity<sup>12</sup>.

Additionally, the Thatcherite part of the British media believed that support for minority cultures, along with support for women, gay rights and the degendering of the curriculum, was part of what they saw as the 'loony left' agenda and 'political correctness gone mad', of which Ken Livingstone and the GLC were exemplars<sup>13</sup>.

On the whole, however, a large proportion of the population did accept multiculturalism and it was generally recognised that the UK was culturally diverse.

The focus on youth within arts policy is something very familiar. Roshni Naidoo has written that: 'We believed once that this was a precursor to a more embedded

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<sup>12</sup> For example, Lola Young (in Dewdney et. al 2010) has highlighted that it was the children of the first generation of Black and Asian Britains whose experience of racism led them to resist and demonstrate against overt as well as implicit forms of racism in their communities and in the institutions of education and culture.

<sup>13</sup> Under the Tory government of Thatcher, there is no doubt that the GLC and Livingstone were very much a 'thorn in their side', as their Marxist ideology clashed with the Conservative one.

approach, but the attention given to the young in diversity projects around “race” seems not to be replicated so enthusiastically beyond this age group’ (2010: 72). This has the effect of constantly reinventing the non-white presence in Britain as something new. It needs to be considered as a long-standing historical fact that is part of the past, present and future. It also means that diversity and representation ‘are always positioned as either being in a state of embryonic development or a work in progress for institutions’ (ibid: 73). For those artists/companies committed to youth projects, such as Lawal and Hylton (analysed in Chapter 4), could be seen as ambassadors of projects that highlight the changes to British identity.

When New Labour came to power in 1997, they re-described and intensified the Tory’s social requirements. They did so within the terminology of, on the one hand, social exclusion and inclusion, and on the other hand, managerialism. The values of Tony Blair (Labour Party Politician and Prime Minister 1997-2007) highlighted that individuals and organisations were empowered as long as they were seen to be successful. Underlying this attitude is the continued growth of the ethos of omni-competence within and towards national governments (see Chandler 2007). It can direct all human activities: science, culture, education, industry and so on. The arts were a weapon against social exclusion. There were to be performance indicators, aims and targets. This was evidence based policy; there would be proof of positive social impact. Under Secretary of State Chris Smith, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) gained additional funding from the Treasury on these grounds. This policy required that art serve the polis, the political ‘we’. The narrative of Smith’s speeches suggested that art had been stolen by its practitioners and audience. In his book, *Creative Britain* (1998), Smith argued that the creative

industries were for everyone, not just the privileged few; targeting elitism in the arts and promising everyone's right to be represented by 'excellent' culture.

From the late 1990s, multiculturalism came under sustained intellectual attack in Western Europe, largely, but not exclusively from the political right. In 1998, the Runnymede Trust<sup>14</sup> set up a Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain under the chairmanship of Member of the House of Lords and political theorists Bhikhu Parekh, and the popular attitude far from welcomed the political agenda of social inclusion being proposed. The role of the Commission was to: '(1) Analyse the present state of Britain as a multi-ethnic country; (2) Suggest ways in which racial discrimination and disadvantage can be countered; and (3) Suggest how Britain can become "a confident and vibrant multicultural society at ease with its rich diversity" (HRM online). Its report, *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* (Parekh 2000), argued against the notion of a monolithic majority culture and described a differentiated picture of all ethnic groups – including white Britons: 'In their own ways they [minority cultures] want society to recognise the legitimacy of their differences, especially those that in their view are not incidental and trivial but spring from and constitute their identities' (2000: 1).

Despite the thoroughness and fair-handedness of the investigation, the report created an uproar, because it dared to propose that Britain was a 'community of communities', and offered a broader model than mere assimilation; attempting to understand how differences as well as conformity need to be accommodated in all

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<sup>14</sup> The Runnymede Trust, founded in 1968 as a charitable educational trust, is an independent policy research organisation working with the government as well as the voluntary sector. Its work focuses on equality and social justice through the promotion of a successful multi-ethnic society.

areas of public life. The reactions to the report demonstrated just how deep cultural conflicts run within citizenship. The right-wing press condemned Parekh, with *The Independent* (2000) writing that the report was 'an insult to our history and our intelligence' and 'sub-Marxist gibberish' (quoted in Miller 2007: 69).

The following year, the events of 11 September 2001 when terrorists successfully led a series of coordinated suicide attacks on the USA hitting the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, exacerbated the situation. In the summer of 2001, Britain witnessed some of its worst inner-city disturbances in nearly two decades. Young British South Asian Muslims, living in the deprived inner cities of Bradford, Oldham and Burnley, clashed violently with local police. Their pent-up fury was a result of generations of socio-economic exclusion, as well as a clever targeting of sensitised areas of right-wing groups working to manufacture ethno-religious tension. The government's responses to the disturbances were telling, for example, New Labour's idea of 'community cohesion' (Home Office 2001) masked what is effectively a case of 'blaming the victim'. Home Secretary David Blunkett MP, while promoting this idea, announced a test of allegiance. He referred to the problems of the 'excess of cultural diversity and moral relativism' that prevents positive change, and also referred to English language issues and female circumcision in speeches soon after 9/11 (see Abbas 2010). In other words, he conflated many different behaviours and cultures with that of the South Asian Muslim community in northwest England. Although these are important issues in their own right, as well as part of a process of making civil society more democratically functional, these were not the factors behind the 'riots'. The assault on multiculturalism became even more determined

with more articles being published by the non-academic press (for example, *Against Strange Fruit* (Malik 2008) or *The tyranny of multiculturalism* (Taylor 2002)).

In Tessa Jowell's first speech to the Labour Party conference as Secretary of State, she declared commitment to 'building access to excellence in all aspects of our cultural life. For everyone, not just for the privileged elite'. In *Government and the Value of Culture* she refers to 'the privileged few' and 'the "cultured" wealthy'. When it was published in 2004, James Fenton and others saw *Government and the Value of Culture* as 'a pretty major sea change' from the social instrumentalism that shaped and justified New Labour arts policies until then<sup>15</sup>. What reveals the ontological divide between art and politics most clearly is when Jowell sets out to praise the arts; she demotes the aesthetic by suggesting that the arts are for everyone, quality art must be available to many and not just the middle and upper classes. By culture she tells us she means art. Art is, she suggests, complex culture that makes demands upon maker and viewer. It is to be distinguished from entertainment. For this, there is no contention. However, she then followed: 'Culture gives us a national identity which is uniquely ours. Culture defines who we are, it defines us as a nation. And *only* culture can do this' (2004). Whether national identity can really be identified through a series of musical, theatrical and artistic preferences is questionable. But as a politician, Jowell cannot speak for the undefined, self-selecting republics of art and letters. She is obliged to impose the political 'we'. As a result, aesthetic experience and judgments become inconsequential:

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<sup>15</sup> See James Fenton (2004) 'Down with this access pottiness', *Guardian*, Saturday May 29.

Value judgements, when fine judgements are required, are certainly to some degree subjective. But the kind of value judgement we make when we allocate millions to the Royal Shakespeare Company cannot be justified on subjective grounds: we need to explain why it is right to do so to a critical bystander or a sceptical voter (Jowell 2004).

As was noted in the introduction, the notion that works of art can 'speak' only to those who already understand and share the value system from which they stem is problematic. What does matter is that the arts can be demonstrably socially wholesome. This has been demonstrated in major shifts of resources to 'educate' audiences. For instance, in their financial years 2000 to 2002 the ACE spent £5 million on 'decibel', an initiative to raise the profile and develop further arts opportunities for people from Asian, African and Caribbean backgrounds, invested £30 million in a capital portfolio of BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) and disability-led organisation as well as creating a Diversity Department 20. These decisions create a context where appointments and decisions can be made for political ends.

As New Labour made preparations for re-election in June 2005 and a third term in power, and although there had been genuine shifts in its approach to multiculturalism, citizenship and social justice, during its second term, the policy of assimilation had been rejuvenated (see Back et al. 2002). By embracing the social-capitalist project, Blair's Britain was defining a new ethnicity – Englishness as opposed to Britishness – in an era of globalisation and devolution<sup>16</sup>. British multiculturalism is a distinctive philosophy that legitimises demands upon unity and

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<sup>16</sup> A strategy Tony Blair's government introduced in 2005 in an attempt to instil knowledge about Britain into immigrants applying for British citizenship (or long-term residency) was the mandatory 'Life in the UK' test, which covered issues such as Britain's constitution, the originating countries of previous UK immigrants, family life in the UK and where dialects like Geordie, Scouse or Cockney come from.



diversity, seeks to achieve political unity without cultural uniformity, and cultivates among its citizens both a common sense of belonging and a willingness to respect and cherish deep cultural differences. Although this is an admirable ambition, it is not easily achieved. The New Labour 'experiment' had both high successes and low failures – the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, the Human Rights Act 1998, the Stephen Lawrence Report 1999. But as a result of 9/11 and the northern 'riots', public policy has focused on domestic security and the war against terrorism.

Since the 1970s, ACE has developed a range of policies and programmes in support of 'ethnic minority arts', 'multi-cultural arts', 'equal opportunities', 'Black arts', 'African People's Dance' and so on. Naseem Khan points out that 'the changing terminology is significant at every stage. Unpacked, it traces the shift from margins to mainstream, from communities to society. For this to take place in a mere twenty or so years is, in actual fact, remarkable' (1997: 3). Change of attitude of the status of dance produced by people of non-white origin in Britain, has allowed this change of terminology and experience. 'Cultural diversity' has differing interpretations but all seem to disguise political inequalities, as the term implies a majority culture against which all 'other' cultures are measured. Slippages have seen 'cultural diversity' being used as a euphemism for 'Black artists', 'Ethnic artists', 'Chinese artists' and so on. Nearly every Arts Council of England policy document since the 1990s has discussed the issue of cultural diversity.

The ACE reports throughout the 1990s continue to attempt to answer questions such as 'what is Black dance?', arguing that there is no such things and that support

should be given to form and quality (Bryan 1993; Arts Council 1996; Arts Council 1998; Siddall 2001). It is the absence of distinctions between forms of dance and purposes that artists have found particularly frustrating (Jeyasingh 1998; Parthasarathi 1993; Bryan 1993). In May 2003, ACE launched the 'public face' of 'decibel' which ran until March 2004, its major initiative to profile cultural diversity in the arts; to commission research, stage debates and assist the development of black and Asian artists and art administrators. With 'celebrating diversity' as one of the ACE's priorities, the decibel initiative was developed 'in recognition that black and minority ethnic (BME) artists and arts organisations are under-represented in the arts' (Arts Council of England, not dated, accessed May 2010). The decibel project had a budget of five million pounds sterling. In addition to this, the ACE set targets of 5.7 million pounds sterling from its Grant for the Arts programme to spend on culturally diverse individual artists, organisations and touring projects in 2004 (see Arts Council website). One of the highlights of this programme was the Performing Arts Showcase which saw over fifty artists and companies presenting work. Phillip Deverell, decibel project manager, wrote before the event that 'this showcase is ideal for promoters to attend as it highlights the best of the multicultural face of Britain' (2003).

What is frustrating about this project is that it is 'largely unheard of outside the industry' (Iqbal 2011, n.p) and its narrow, defined and exclusive nature, for example, performers at the showcase included Benji Reid, Nitro, Yellow Earth Theatre, Union Dance, spoken word from Renaissance One, and music from Dele Sosimi's Afrobeat Orchestra. These companies and performers are not new or emerging, but mid-career, established professionals touring and performing regularly, and were being

used as ambassadors for the promotion of a particular kind of work. Arts Council heavily relies upon the surveys, data and reports prepared by third parties; specifically by the organisations directly funded by the ACE. This resulted in the creation of policies that again misinterpreted 'diversity' and 'ethnicity' as a separate segment of the society that needs to be 'addressed'. Further, if cultural diversity had been an integral part of the British mainstream then there should not have been a need for millions of pounds to be spent on the official support and promotion of this version of 'cultural apartheid'. To separate the work of these artists by racial categorisations, is to deny them their uniqueness of being simply artists and 'only leads to a culture of paternalism and dependency, but also to a reductive view of the arts as a conduit through which to improve society in relation to equalities' (Roshni Naidoo 2010: 77). There continues to be institutional insistence on its separatism and exclusion from the mainstream.

### **Multiculturalism and Racism**

Multiculturalism was developed as a concept largely to fight discrimination and racism. However, racism is still very much prevalent in contemporary society. Annamaria Rivera states that: 'Racism is not a marginal, pathological or conjunctural phenomenon. On the contrary, it is, as are universalism and egalitarianism, one of the constituent elements of European culture, destined to reappear periodically, and especially in moments of transition or crisis' (2000: 209). Lola Young (1993) has argued that multiculturalism can and has brought about cultural segmentation; dividing instead of unifying Asian and Afro-Caribbean groups specifically. Young has pleaded for a policy that eliminates all discriminatory procedures instead of

multiculturalism that acts as a salve to guilty consciences. Asian artists are said to offer more which derives from absolutely non-European traditions, which in some respects makes it more 'ethnic', 'authentic' or 'classical'; more 'exotic' for Western eyes. It is possible that this is the reason that South Asian dance is more prominent than African peoples' dance in the UK. The countries of the Far East suffered imperialism in different ways than African countries. They were not enslaved, and they resisted in large measure the persuasions of Christian missionaries. Thus, religion has in some respects created a barrier to the integration and understanding of South Asian dance work, for example, Ester Gallo (2014) argues that there is a 'messiness' of the constructions of religion and Hinduism within diasporic Indian classical dance performances and because of the historically constructed nature of religion, there may be some ambivalences that dancers express when trying to situate their work within a religious/secular binary. Although for the most part, Indians in Britain have been poor and from the lower classes, they had everything to gain from the British system which afforded economic mobility to those who worked hard. There is also the issue that Black and Asian communities are racially categorised in a different way, in a socio-political structure<sup>17</sup>.

Cultural theorist, writer, art historian and critic, Kobena Mercer, notes that black communities in Britain were 'invisible'. Mercer has expressed that various factors contributed to the shifts of the 1980s which, if they can be traced to a single source, occurred outside the institutions of British society in the political events of 1981 (he

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<sup>17</sup> Multiculturalism operates on the assumption that 'communities' have a relatively solid internal structure that the state can deal with. More than some other ethnic minority groups in the UK, traditional Muslim families and their wider social networks do resemble a 'community' with a structure. There is no equivalent New Labour relation with 'the black community' (or, at least, it is not at all the same) as there is with the Muslim community and its political organs.

recalls a firebomb attack on a parry in the southwest London suburb of New Cross, where thirteen black teenagers died, and yet 'the culprits were never found and indifference was the main response of British establishment' (Mercer 1994: 6)). The 'riots' and 'uprisings' had the symbolic effect of marking a break with the consensus politics of multiculturalism and announced a new phase of crisis management in British race relations. For Mercer, 'the position of black subjects in Britain' was that they were 'invisible, marginal and silenced by subjection to a racism by which [they] failed to enjoy equal protection under the law as common citizens' (ibid: 7). At the same time, however, and somewhat paradoxically, they were also 'too visible....too vocal and.....too central, in Britain's post-Imperial body politic, as a reminder and remainder of its historical past, and of the paradoxical disadvantage of an early start as one of the key factors of its present day, post Empire, decline' (ibid), their presence in Britain being the direct result of British colonialism.

What is important to me is that there are now three million black people or more in Britain today. In 10 or 15 years there will be a whole generation of black people who were born in Britain, who were educated in Britain and who grew up in Britain. They will be intimately related to the British people, but they cannot be fully part of the English environment because they are black. Everyone including their parents is aware that they are different. Now that is not a negative statement...Those people who are in western civilisation, who have grown up in it, but yet are not completely a part (made to feel and themselves feeling that they are outside) have a unique insight into their society...the black man or woman who is born here and grows up here has something special to contribute to western civilisation. He or she will participate in it, see it from birth, but will never be quite completely in it. What such persons have to say, therefore, will give a new vision, a deeper and stronger insight into both western civilisation and the black people in it (James 1984: 55).

A whole new generation of black British artists, activists, image-makers and intellectuals emerged in the turbulent and volatile shifts of the 1980s to contribute to a wealth of insights into the changing meanings of 'race' and ethnicity.

The UK has continuous high immigration rates<sup>18</sup>, among the highest in the European Union (EU). Most of the immigrants since the end of the Second World War, came from the Indian subcontinent or the Caribbean or Africa; our former colonies (in 2004, Poland and seven other Eastern European countries joined the EU which increased migration to the UK; the largest group of migrants were from Poland). In the 2011 Census, it was shown that the British non-white population amounts to just over 10%, but one of the most prominent headlines was that London is now '45 per cent white British', and the loose discussion of the finding created a misleading meme (Office for National Statistics 2011). Overall, it seems that three quarters of Londoners are British citizens and under a quarter foreign nationals. But a discussion which conflates ethnicity and nationality risks misleading people about both dimensions. The official census media briefings prominently flagged up the 45 per cent figure on its own as a 'key finding', without ensuring that it does and does not mean about how white or British London was understood. Making the '45 per cent white British' statistic the headline claim is to see the salient contrast as between 'white Britons' and 'ethnic minorities', immigrants and foreigners (as immigrants include both British citizens and foreign nationals). That would seem to

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<sup>18</sup> There have always been episodes of migration to the UK, but those episodes were small and demographically insignificant until the Second World War. A date that is often given and seen as significant for the start of immigration into Britain is 22 June 1948: the day that the ex-troopship *Empire Windrush* pulled into Tilbury docks bringing 492 Jamaican men and women to the UK. The population in Britain increased slowly, growing by less than two million in the forty years between 1951 and 1991. In the late 1990s, the pace and scale of migration increased to a level without historical precedent. Indeed the foreign born population of England and Wales more than doubled, increasing by nearly four million between 1991 and 2001 censuses.

depend on the outdated premise that non-white Britons, including those born here, are not viewed as being authentically British as their white fellow citizens. It has already been highlighted that the national popular media who like nothing more than to exacerbate the situation by talking about Britain being swamped by foreigners, which could infer onto the general public and their perception of the 'state' of Britain could be skewed. Fortunately, the idea that British identity being dependent on white ethnicity is regarded as a very non-British idea by very broad majorities of white and non-white Britons alike; most would think of Jessica Ennis (British track and field athlete who won Olympic heptathlon gold for Great Britain in 2012 whose father is originally from Jamaica) or Ian Wright (English former professional footballer who is of Jamaican descent) as no less British than they are, because they are mixed race or black rather than 'white British'.

The sociologist Floya Anthias points out that class and gender differences are interlaced with race and ethnicity to produce complex forms of hierarchy (2001: 635). Therefore, multicultural identities reveal much about individual agency and positioning in relation to race and ethnicity, as well as social, political and cultural hierarchies. If equality is about respecting previously demeaned identities (for example, taking pride in one's blackness rather than accepting it merely as a 'private' matter), then what is being addressed in anti-discrimination or promoted as a public identity, is a chosen and purposeful response to one's ascription.

The possible contribution of Black and Asian British are written about, notably in Yasmin Alibhai-Brown's *Who do we think we are?* (2000). The artists included for

analysis within this thesis may not admit that the promotion of a particular national identity within their work is a priority, but I believe that dance is a manifestation of its negotiation. Like all social movements, national identity can be ‘invented’, which gives power to the people who are doing the inventing<sup>19</sup>. Primarily, this is in the hands of the policy makers, but dance artists also have power within this system; they can find new possibilities and subversive potential within these parameters. The artists give the art form its identity through the way that they choose to express it. Artists are visionaries; they are inventors and innovators who, by continually questioning and pushing boundaries, lead in the development of ideas. Their profile allows them to increase choreographers’ and dancers’ capacities to present and contextualise their work, it is because of this that I can argue that these high profile choreographers, such as Khan and Jeyasingh, can open up possibilities for individuals within these communities to choreograph in anticipation of a future when all can participate in a mainstream without prejudice and discrimination. As we have already learnt however, it is ironic that these communities that the artists represent are actually the minority of their audiences<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> There is a distinction between ethnic and civic national identity, with the most crucial difference being that in the former, citizenship is believed to be inherited from birth, whilst in the latter, it is voluntaristic and can be acquired (Greenfeld 1992: 11). The nation is constructed through what Eric Hobsbawm has called the invention of tradition:

‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past (1983: 1).

<sup>20</sup> For example, in 2004 it is estimated that 43% of people from white ethnic groups attended theatre compared to 16% of those from minority ethnic groups. 15% of people from a white ethnic group attended a dance event compared to 7% of people from minority ethnic groups (Scottish Arts Council 2005). A study by Francis found that a lack of acknowledgement of the contributors of African, Caribbean and Asian people to both historical and contemporary British culture had the effect of marginalising these communities and causing mainstream art to be of little interest or relevance to them: ‘institutionalised’ art forms are ‘irrelevant, old-fashioned, somebody else’s (Francis 1990, cited in Bridgwood, et al. 2003: 20).



Multiculturalism may have some conceptual limitations, but as a model has proved in other countries, it is workable for civic tolerance where there is still struggle from the burden of white-supremacist past (Hutcheon and Richmond 1990), but, at the moment, multiculturalism continues to operate as a form of wilfully aestheticising exoticist discourse. This discourse inadvertently serves to disguise persistent racial tensions within Britain, and one which, in affecting a respect for the other as a reified object of cultural difference, deflects attention away from social issues; discrimination, unequal access, hierarchies of ethnic privilege, that are far from being resolved.

Multiculturalism 'turns' ethnicity into a commodity, encouraging a view of ethnic cultures, or even culture itself, as 'a thing that can be displayed, performed, admired, bought, sold or forgotten' (Bissoondath 1994: 84). Multiculturalism thus, both embodies and legitimises the spectacularising process of the exotic, a process that converts people into alternating objects of attraction and resentment (ibid: 122). It is possible though, Bissoondath admits, to embrace this theatricalised sense of cultural otherness:

For those who would rather be accepted for their individuality, who resent being distinguished only by their differences, it can prove a matter of some irritation, even discomfort. The game of exoticism can cut two ways: it can prevent an individual from being ordinary, and it can prevent that individual from being accepted (ibid: 116).

The artists/companies included in this thesis for analysis have consistently articulated their frustrations at being asked to represent their particular ethnicities

and 'home countries'. Further as Bissoondath has contested above, and by bringing multiculturalism into alignment with exoticism, emphasis has been placed on the former's capacity for the decontextualisation of socio-cultural experience. Thus, whilst the concept of multiculturalism demonstrates a desire for other voices to be heard and for non-mainstream views to be included and celebrated, this can easily lend itself to various forms of exploitation and manipulation.

### **Dance and Multicultural Britain**

A number of reports commissioned in the 1980s and early 1990s (see for example, Gahir 1984, Hyde et al. 1996, Gordzeijko 1996, Iyer 1997, Jarret-Macauley 1997), looking at different aspects of South Asian dance in education and community contexts, showed clearly that dancers were more often than not treated as exotica expected to provide a whole cultural experience, rather than as dance artists performing highly sophisticated and demanding techniques. Further, Grau has observed that in the research that she carried out with her colleagues, Bharata Natyam Dancer Magdalene Gorringer and scholar of dance and visual culture Alessandra Lopez y Royo, about South Asian Dance in Britain, that some dancers, were being asked by school teachers to produce the whole 'package': tying saris for the children, making some Indian food, as well as dancing (2008: 242). Although much later than these examples, I can recount a similar situation in 2000 where I was working as a Creative Practitioner with an Indian dance company in Leicestershire. The organisers of the project were very clear that the aim was to inspire, support and facilitate an innovative and engaging project for a chosen school, in order to impart wisdom about the creative process to students and

teachers and provide tools for them to continue working in a creative way after the project had finished, in performing arts/dance, as well as in other subject areas. However, the same expectations were not shared by the chosen school and with me working with an Indian dance company, they wanted the project to focus on teaching the students all about India (we had to dress the students up in saris, cook, deliver history sessions, discuss religion and politics), as well as provide an introduction to Indian dancing and storytelling. However, other white creative practitioners I knew that were working at the same time did not have the same expectations. Further, dancer/choreographer Subodh Rathod has articulated his frustrations about how an Arts Council assessor viewed his work stating that: 'It was interesting to note that an assessor sent to appraise the show, had no obvious knowledge of South Asian arts. The kurta pyjama I was wearing was described as a 'sari' – which to a reader who has a sprinkling knowledge of South Asian culture refers to the cloth worn by women or men in drag – and the Kathak bols used were referred to as 'gargling noises' (Rathod 2000: 21). So, as was stated in the introduction, critics and funders are 'reading' and constructing the exotic aspects of the work produced by South Asian dancers and practitioners and often reading it on a superficial level.

Grau (1992: 3-29) also conducted a study of intercultural theatre in the 1980s, which showed how artists manipulated their identities according to their circumstances, generally presenting themselves as *actors*, but in some cases as *black dancers* or in other cases as *contemporary dancers*. In like manner, some audiences often perceived their performances as *African* and as stylistically *homogenous* when they were performed solely by black artists, even if the dancers were of different origins (United States, Jamaica, Brazil or Nigeria). The same held true if the dance

techniques were derived from traditional *Tw*, *Hausa*, *Igbo* and *Yoruba* dance cultures from contemporary Nigeria. If, on the contrary, the dancers' skin colour varied, the works were perceived as the expression of *intercultural* art and *heterogeneous* style. What is imperative is that every individual has the right to claim multiple origins in accordance with his or her individual path, often shaped in part by socio-historical events, without 'being forced in any sort of ghetto' (Grau 2007: 200). Grau has highlighted that some South Asian dancers take on board the prejudices of their profession and their society, for example, while discussing the experiences of South Asian dancers in school, comments were heard such as, 'I teach folk and technique' ('technique' here referring to classical dance, as if folk dance required no technique) (Grau 2008: 242). As has been examined in the introduction, classification and categorisation are rarely neutral and always reveal something about the ideology of the people who create them.

The symposium report of 'No Man's Land – Exploring South Asianness' (2004) written by Shiromi Pinto, includes a section by Grau who suggests that our Western classifications of dance say much about class, power relations and race, especially if these dance forms are perceived to be aligned with mainstream artistic practice. Grau's research has shown that many artists (including Jeyasingh) are inclined to engage with the label 'South Asian Dance' because of its advantages (Pinto noted in the report that many of the arts practitioners taking part in the symposium took their interpretations of 'South Asianness' to a metaphorical level allowing it to be a concept with fluid boundaries (2004: 15)). The participants even believed that the term 'South Asian' was a step up from 'multiculturalism'. Having said this, Keith Khan believed that the terms such as 'South Asian' were essentially redundant and that

cultural fluidity was the more accurate reflection of reality. There is a concern that when South Asian dance enters a 'white space' that is reduced to an 'other' ethnic identity. Further, Vena Ramphal writes that:

If we say that aesthetics is dependent on identity then the practice and availability of South Asian dance forms become contingent on certain identities. This contingency automatically excludes other 'identities' from participating in those aesthetics. I suggest that the conventions of Bharata Natyam or any other South Asian dance – its technique, theory, philosophy, pedagogy – should not be subsumed under the banner of identity. Aesthetics should not be confused with a politics of representation. This statement may seem to mitigate against the work that is being put in by policy-makers to represent a range of arts. But it does not. It makes that range equally available to practitioners and audiences irrespective of ethnicity, or any other aspect of identity (2002: 17).

In the present climate, in my opinion, it is not possible to first see a dancer, and only afterwards that they are then a member of an ethnic group. It is necessary to find an aesthetics that is bound by the strictures of racial history.

The ACE's 'Cultural Diversity Action Plan 1998-2003' report described cultural diversity as 'ethnic diversity resulting from post-war immigration'. ACE is committed to developing the creative or artistic case for diversity, which recognises that art placed at the margins through structural barriers and antiquated and exclusive approaches need to be brought to the centre of our culture and valued accordingly. Khan's 1976 report, set out the terms for what was subsequently to be adopted by arts administrators as 'ethnic minority arts' and which quickly became inseparable from the meaning of 'cultural diversity'. That these terms were accepted so uncritically by both sympathetic administrations and the majority of British African,

African Caribbean and Asian artists is due largely to the fact that the mainstream visual arts establishment was not a level playing field and positive discrimination was seen as the only immediate answer to endemic institutional racism (see Fisher 2010). The historical apathy and lack of proactive engagement of white dominated arts institutions with cultural diversity reinforces the perception that, like racism, cultural diversity is seen to be the concern of ethnically diverse people alone. Hylton argued in 2007 that cultural diversity policies continue to categorise individuals along the racial or ethnic lines, and insofar as separate diversity funding provisions for 'black arts' absolve the more prestigious institutions and funders from engagement with 'minority' artists as independent practitioners alongside white artists, they have the effect of legitimising a segregated artworld. Diversity initiatives and policies are involved with developing new audiences, education and young people and there are people employed to 'do diversity'. Thus, Lawal's Sakoba Dance Theatre Company and other examples discussed throughout this thesis, may be being 'used' to develop and 'educate' audiences about African dance and fulfil the audience development strategy, which can begin to problematise the idea of the 'mainstream' dance sector; whereas diversity policies have had the effect of constantly reinventing a non-white presence in Britain as new and the future, Lawal's work attempts to highlight that it is a long-standing historical fact.

### **Choices available for postcolonial artists**

Research on postcolonial societies has, on the one hand, predominantly addressed the conditions of social integration or cohesion in profoundly heterogenous societies; it focused, in other words, on state-formation and nation-building in 'plural societies'.

Darshan S Tatla's argument (2003) in favour of cross-fertilisation between the literatures on multiculturalism and plural societies, clearly demonstrates that contemporary migration constitutes a transnational social space in which the construction of collective identities is affected by postcolonial experiences and dominant discourses of 'multiculturalism' alike (see Tatla et al. 03). It is obvious that the emergence of such transnational spaces supported by increasingly global flows of communication profoundly modifies the social contexts of public policies aimed at governing cultural diversity. No single theory exists of what multiculturalism is or how it should be applicable at all times and places. For example, the articles in 'Pluralism and Multiculturalism in Colonial and Post-Colonial Societies' (Koenig 2003), serve to show that when social scientists from different countries and different disciplines consider this problem, they recognise that the very term has a variety of meanings. The concept of the governance of multiculturalism is an ideological one, although this is itself part of the reality of our social and political world.

Debates over postcolonialism represent genuine disagreements, both theoretical and political; but also involve a range of conceptual confusions about the scope of its major claims. For example, in the work of Frantz Fanon (1968), it is argued that independence from colonialism does not mean liberation, and that 'national consciousness' often fails to achieve freedom because its aspirations are primarily those of the colonised bourgeoisie, who simply replace the colonial rule with their own form of dominance, surveillance and coercion over the vast majority of the people, often using the same vocabulary of power. Fanon regards as deeply problematic any characterisation of colonialism in terms of binary opposition of coloniser and colonised. Instead, he insists that colonialism may only be understood

as a complicated network of complicities and internal power imbalances between groups within the broader categories of coloniser and colonised. Fanon thus challenges the fixed ideas of settled identity and culturally authored definitions located within the traditions of western rationality. He contends that even after independence, the colonial subjects remain colonised internally, psychologically. Their ways of 'reading' the world and their desires are carried across into their desire for 'whiteness' through a kind of metempsychosis: 'their desires have been transposed, though they never, of course, actually become white. They have a black skin, with a white mask' (Young 2003: 144). It is possible to argue that this links to why postcolonial dance artists are so desperate to be a part of what they consider to be a 'mainstream' in Britain.

What is compelling about Bhabha's argument is that it refuses to view colonial power in some absolute sense, always guaranteed to produce the intended effects in the colonial subjects. Instead, it involves subversion, transgressions, insurgence and mimicry. Bhabha argues that:

If the effect of colonial power is seen to be the production of hybridisation rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native traditions, then an important change of perspective occurs. The ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority enables a form of subversion, founded on the undecidability that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention (1994: 112).

However, what Bhabha is unable to overlook is the fact that the colonised subject's mode of resistance is itself constrained by the language of the dominant group



(McLeod 2000). It has already been noted that critics often 'mis-read' or are unable to pick up on the subtleties and write about the work of postcolonial artists in a meaningful manner.

The notion of hybridity is central to Bhabha's understanding of resistance to the exercise of colonial power. According to Bhabha, it is in its hybrid forms that colonial knowledge can be re-inscribed and given new, unexpected and oppositional meanings, as a way of 'restaging the past' (1994: 2). In contemporary contexts, he argues, the processes of hybridisation have demolished forever the idea of subjectivity as stable, single and 'pure', and have drawn attention to the ways diasporic peoples in particular, are able to challenge exclusionary systems of meaning (ibid: 7). It is this possibility that enables them to disrupt the exclusionary binary logics upon which discourses of colonialism, nationalism and patriarchy depend. This is where the work of postcolonial dance artists assume an important task of interrupting received ways of thinking about the world, and articulating the hybridity and difference that lies within. What does need to be further considered is that as a theoretical idea, hybridity is indeed a useful antidote to cultural essentialism, but cannot in itself provide the answers to the difficult questions of how hybridity takes place, the form it takes in a particular context, the consequences it has for particular cultural groups, and when and how particular hybrid formations are progressive or regressive. As has been stated earlier in this chapter, cultural policy favours those postcolonial artists who take on contemporaneity and push boundaries in terms of form and presentation.

Through the trenches of global intersectionality, it is important to recognise that hybridity can be a forced construct, which creates a space for both development and decline, for example, through the promotion of hybrid work via funding, grantors may show favour to projects that involve collaboration with other cultural groups or mainstream culture, with modern dancers, orchestras, theatre directors, and other opportunities which provide them a wider audience, prestige and greater financial viability. However, to speak of two cultural forms merging to form a hybrid third, risks constructing the original forms as stable, monolithic entities grounded in opposition or difference. But, hybridity is a necessary concept to hold onto, because unlike other key concepts in the contemporary politics of difference, such as diaspora and multiculturalism, it 'foregrounds complicated entanglement rather than identity, togetherness-in-difference rather than separateness and virtual apartheid' (Ang 2005: 3). In 1988, anthropologist Clifford Geertz had already noted that people live in a globalised world in which 'people quite different from one another in interest, outlook, wealth, and power' (1988: 147) and 'are contained in a world where, tumbled as they are into endless connection, it is increasingly difficult to get out of each other's way' (ibid). Hybridity helps to prevent the absorption of all differences into homogeneity and thus, claiming one's 'difference' and turning it into symbolic capital has become a powerful and attractive strategy among those who have been marginalised or excluded from the structures of white or Western hegemony.

Creativity anchors policy to individual subjectivity through self-recognition, aided by the shift in rhetorical emphasis from the 'arts' to 'culture' to 'creativity' (see Quinn 1998). 'The arts' connote high culture and elite consumption, whereas 'culture' more inclusively bridges the aesthetic and the anthropological (Miller and Yúdice 2002: 1).

That cultural policy serves state interest in producing self-regulating subjects devoted to capital accumulation has become a commonplace of the cultural-studies-based analysis of institutions<sup>21</sup>. Indeed, Toby Miller and George Yúdice define cultural policy as ‘the merger of governmentality and taste.....dedicated to producing subjects via the formation of repeatable styles of conduct, either at the level of the individual or the public (2002: 12). Both neoliberal and Third-Way cultural policies thus act as modes of microregulation, albeit with different emphases, seeking to adapt the populace to a life unsheltered from the volatile weather of market competition. The neoliberal preference for separating service delivery from government policy-making ostensibly protected the ‘arm’s length’ principle of state funding of the arts in a liberal democracy, in which fund-distribution decisions are made by specialists and peers to ensure the artistic freedom of expression; decisions made for reasons of artistic merit and not short-term political instrumentalism. However, tightening budgets and stringent accountability mechanisms have tended instead to render arts-funding agencies more subject to surveillance. In Britain, ‘government influence has been increasing steadily since the 1980s’ (Quinn 1998: 90), to the extent that the cultural policies of the Blair government can be provocatively likened to the strategies of Soviet Socialist Realism (Brighton 1999: 24-34). Thus, the arm’s length principle is reversed: cultural agencies serve not to protect artists and their audiences from government but, rather, offer a vehicle to disperse the form of social control that Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose term ‘government at a distance’ (1990: 1-31).

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<sup>21</sup> See Tony Bennett, ‘Useful Culture’, *Cultural Studies* 6(3) 1992: 395-408.

DCMS was established in July 1997, which meant that at this point, central government 'reclaimed' responsibility for cultural policy. More financial backing would be poured into the sector, in return for matching government objectives. Under the Labour government, the ACE and DCMS gained awareness that the arts were not only good in themselves, but are valued for their economic contribution, urban regeneration and social inclusion effects. Therefore, although the ACE would necessarily be reactive to government policies, it is not coincidental that the ACE made the assertion that the term 'multiculturalism' has become worn out at the same time as Government officials have been backing this ideal. Jonathon Vickery noted that within the emerging social instrumentalism,

...culture and creativity were means to generate an already existing process of social reconstruction, in which culture was conceived unquestioningly as wholly positive, not itself ridden by structural contradictions and conflicts, but which could create unproblematic modes of engagement with leisure, training, job creation and industry (2007: 58).

Vickery argues that the social reconstruction came at a cost of an impoverished concept of culture.

The 'stable point of identification' for the nation that Lydia Wevers and Mark Williams (2002) refer to thus entails the government production of creative subjects who are not docilely regulated so much as adventurously risk-taking and deregulated. This programme, Tim Corballis summarises dystopically,

fits neatly into constructions of nationhood devoid of citizenship: a nation understood as a collection of fully independent individuals, expecting no help from their compatriots, but each of whose creativity is claimed by the branded collective in the race for position in the world market (2003: 62).

Together with Wevers and Williams, Corballis argues that art can only relocate its point of resistance by extracting itself from this attenuated yet compulsory mode of corporatized creativity and decolonising itself from the indiscriminate semantic spread of the term 'culture'.

There has been very little written that takes up the position of postcolonial studies in relation to globalisation. Imre Szeman (2001) has pointed out that this is partly due to the differences in their disciplinary origins (globalisation in the social sciences and postcolonial theory in literary and cultural studies), but may have more to do with the fact that the animating concepts of postcolonial theory, such as place, identity, difference, the nation and modes of resistance, focus on the particular, while there are remains a strong current of universalism in various constructions of globalisation, especially as they appear to suggest the emergence of a single homogenous planetary space. Furthermore, while the main impulse of postcolonial theory is deconstructive and liberatory, globalisation 'acts as a justification and as an ideological screen for the rapid, global spread of a pernicious neo-liberal capitalism intent on reversing the social gains of the past five decades and in introducing an economic rationality into the public sphere' (Szeman 2001: 211).

For postcolonial theory to be useful to the analysis of the global processes, then, some of its central concepts need to be examined. Simon During (2000) has suggested that, by deploying concepts like hybridity, ambivalence and mimicry – all of which imply the incorporation of the colonised into colonising cultures – postcolonialism has effectively become a reconciliatory rather than a critical, anti-colonialist category. During argues that a more critical postcolonialism is needed if we are to understand how colonial assumptions remain embedded within the new discourses and practices of globalisation, as expressed in the totalising reach of increasingly flexible forms of capitalism that seek to intensify the convergence of local cultures and societies. But this needs to be done without losing sight of the historical specificity of the ways in which particular groups engage with global relations of power that produce for them highly localised expressions of globalisation.

One of the major achievements of postcolonialism has been its insistence that, far from being secondary to the economics of colonialism, discursive and cultural practices must be viewed as essential to the production and maintenance of colonial relations. If this is so then clearly new analytical strategies are needed to help to understand the economics and cultural politics of colonial legacies without reducing one to another. Without such strategies it may not be possible to fully describe the various continuities and discontinuities between colonialism and globalisation.

As Grau has argued 'Identitarian positions open and close doors' and 'in our hyper capitalist world, it can be said that we are that for which others are willing to pay' (2007: 201) and thus, the way in which artists present themselves and their work has

repercussions on the funding they can obtain and on the venues that they may be able to perform. The questions that Grau poses and are necessary to answer are relevant to this thesis: 'who creates the boundaries of our identities, and how these boundaries are established both from within and without?' (ibid). Thus, this is another reason why I feel that it is necessary to take into account what the artists and companies say about their experiences and intentions, and thus how aspects of their identity politics are invoked into their artistic practices. White European and North American dance artists generally remain unmarked and are allowed to concern themselves purely with aesthetic questions. This is often not the case for dancers of colour. Thus it is necessary to examine the conditions that determine when, in choreography and performance, Asian dance artists and British based artists who are Black who are required to carry the 'burden of representation', and under what circumstances they can sometimes appear to escape it.

## **Chapter 1: Conclusion**

Cultural policy has helped promote the idea that culture matters politically, but in transforming all culture into political action, all subjects have been 'put to work', but people and particularly artists of colour do not want every action to be considered instrumentally. Groups of people become burdened and the expectations of cultural policies and dominant critical discourse (to be analysed in the following chapter) favour British Asian and Afro-Caribbean dancers who are pushing boundaries in terms of dance; innovation and creativity is celebrated. While dance forms identified with specific cultures are staged for British and international audiences, the same

dance forms might be reinterpreted and invested with new meaning within the home culture.



## Chapter 2

### Critical Methodology

For the process of analysis to be thorough and insightful, an understanding of the many contexts of a dance – its immediate dance context and how this appears within the work, as well as the wider artistic framing and sub-cultural context – is always necessary. The world of high modernism, real or imagined, has receded from the central place it once occupied for artists, critics and scholars, moved aside in favour of forms of analysis that take account of this cultural and historical positioning, making it doubly complex. In our postmodernist times, in the work of these postcolonial artists and companies a construction of layers of culturally disparate materials is constructed, whether in social, political or personal life. These ‘layers’ will need to be exposed in the analysis of the dance works. Thus, to create a specific methodology appropriate to the issues and questions I will aim to locate in the work of the chosen artists/companies, the ‘performativity’ of displacedness.

Artists living in Diaspora share postcolonial concerns of representation, transnational flows and politics of location, and embody diasporic identity. Bhabha has argued that hybridity can create openings for agency, but that agency is possible only with subjection. Thus, it follows that we do not act under conditions of our own choosing; we act within a given discursive context. Speaking of agency as a kind of ‘translation’, Bhabha argues that ‘there must be a text for it to be translated. It may be a priority that is internally luminal or displaced, but there is something there that endows a particular kind of authorisation and authentication’ (1995: 83). There is no question of effecting change from somewhere ‘outside the text’ (to echo Derrida);

agency can happen no matter whether the given text is interdictive, repressive, stereotypical or orientalist. All of Bhabha's instances of agency arise precisely from the challenge of imperial authority, each instance a specific response, but also an impediment, to such authority. Key to the notion of acting only with(in) a given discursive terrain is the idea of repetition. Derrida points out that all utterances (or 'speech acts') are repetitions (or 'citational doubling'), so that when one articulates, one is actually re-articulating (1982: 307). Each iteration is never the same, moreover, because it is always marked by difference (contained in the very structure of language). This means that discourse is always already iterative, and each discursive iteration is differently articulated in different contexts. Bhabha writes: 'To recognise the difference of the colonial presence is to realise that the colonial text occupies that space of double inscription, hallowed – no, hollowed – by Jacques Derrida' (1994: 108). The implication for politics is that agency is precisely the performance, the acting out, of this repetition. Thus, it is not by accident that Bhabha refers to 'mimicry' as a strategy of both colonial subjection and subterfuge<sup>22</sup>: 'The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority' (1994: 88). Thus the idea of 'repetition' is a re-statement of the idea of 'discursive instability', creates the opportunity for postcolonial agency. From the perspective of politics though, the notion of 'repetition' adds to the earlier notion of 'discursive instability' the important point that agency is restricted to only those openings and opportunities presented by discursive subjection.

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<sup>22</sup> Bhabha actually borrows the notion of mimicry from Lacan (see 1994: 90), but its parallels with Derrida's notion of repetition are unmistakable.

Bhabha argues that agency's role is precisely about exposing repetition, its 'staging' of the ambivalence and contingency of authority. He calls this 'desacralis[ing] the transparent assumptions of cultural supremacy', 'introduc[ing] a lack' or 'exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference – be it class, gender or race' (1994: 228, 119, 219). Secondly, agency repeats 'the lessons of the masters' but 'changes their inflections' (1995: 94). Bhabhaian politics are a kind of variation on a (discursive) theme: mimicry is not just returned, it is returned as mockery; colonial Christianity is not just reappropriated and reinterpreted, it is misappropriated, misinterpreted, mistranslated, estranged. Bhabha speaks of 'small differences' and 'slight alterations and displacements' as 'often the most significant elements in a process of subversion or transformation' (1995: 82). Bhabha calls this a 'Third Space' (1994: 37), that is, a position that is made possible by discursive subjection, but cannot be directly derived from it. Thus, agency is about negotiating 'polarisations without acceding to their foundation claims' (1995: 83), 'both challenging the boundaries of discourse and subtly changing its terms' (1994: 119); Bhabha is retrieving the creative possibilities in agency.

The notion that agency happens only within discourse is a conundrum for identity politics, since it implies that the identity that you call upon for agency is restricted to an imposed script: you can construct it exclusively from the signification system of the coloniser or hegemony, which is a difficult position to defend in the face of many nationalist or decolonisation movements, which aim at mitigating the native's estrangement from their own culture by recovering a 'pure' or 'indigenous' history and regaining a sense of national pride. Bhabha argues that the nationalist, politician and cultural critic alike can neither extricate themselves from their position in

postcolonial history, nor resort to a language uncontaminated by orientalism or imperialism: they have no 'immediate access to an originary identity or a "received" tradition (1994: 2).

Bhabha notes that 'forms of popular rebellion and mobilisation are often most subversive and transgressive when they are created through.....cultural practices' (1994: 20). There is an unmistakable theatricality attendant in Bhabha's notion of performativity; frequently, his notion of agency is both a 'show' and a 'showing up' (Kulynych 1997: 323), as witnessed by the mischief-making, 'messing around' and meddling that his agents engage in. The comedic and parodic elements of his narrative help demonstrate to the readers/audience, and draws them into, the agent's campaign to scrutinise, mock and/or interrupt the hegemonic discourse. Like all (political) theatre, the comedic is mixed in with the dramatic: as Hannah Arendt underlines (1958: 180, 191) and Bhabha considers (1994: 12-13), a performance is always risky and unpredictable, with the protagonists never sure of the impact of their words and actions. Jessica Kulynych explains:

[T]he performative protestor does not argue against the state, he mocks it. The protestor works at the margins of the discourse, utilising puns and jokes and caricature to 'expose' the limits of what is being said. Thus, performative resistance, when considered as critique, does not need to tell us what is wrong, rather it reveals the existence of subjection where we had not previously seen it...performativity it not about normative distinctions. We bring normativity to our performances as ethical principles that are themselves subject to resistance. By unearthing the contingency of the 'self-evident', performative resistance enables politics. Thus, the question is not should we resist (since resistance is always, already present), but rather what and how we should resist (1997: 323).

Bhabha's performative politics are an implied critique of the 'grand politics' carried out by, and viewed from the perspective of, elites and the state. His is an attempt to democratise politics. In part, the goal is to widen the political terrain by capturing the myriad and daily forms of subjection, as well as the concomitant, 'ordinary' acts of resistance. Kulynych argues that performative politics are not amenable to, but can throw new light on, mainstream politics: performativity is:

...important not only for understanding the potential for innovation in the micro-politics of identity, but also for understanding the potential for innovation in an inter-subjective politics of deliberation...Performative resistance is evident in intimate and personal relationships, in the deliberations of civil society, and in the problem-solving institutions of the constitutional state (1997: 324, 327).

There are important reasons why the chosen artists/companies are having to work within discourse, which have principally to do with the dangers of opposing, reversing or cancelling power lest it be reproduced in new forms. Thus, finding the paradox of acting within an imposed discourse or tradition, but still subverting its representational codes and producing new and unanticipating sites, makes them 'radical' and innovative.

It is my contention that because of their unique position 'in-between' cultures (to use Bhabha's concept) they use aesthetics of dis-identification and practices of re-signification. A knowledge and examination of postcolonial theory and the significance of issues such as hegemony, identity, language, place and Western supremacy, allows the spectator to identify these concerns, whilst also appreciating

the underlying concerns in the choreography. Since the widespread collapse of colonialism, certain group cultures have been working to define and understand themselves outside the bounds of colonialism. Thus, the performances produced by postcolonial artists have the potential to be cultural expressions of resistance to colonialism. Therefore, postcolonialism is both an effect and a reading strategy for the purpose of this analysis; it is a way of taking into account the context in which the choreographers operate and see themselves. The legacy of colonialist and Euro-American attitudes is perpetuated in aesthetic and dance theory, which means that very specific socio-cultural values are intrinsic in the guise of universal truth/s set by historical legacy, Western scholars, critics and policy makers. It is necessary to follow examinations of a bodily discourse as emphasised by Jane Desmond (1994) and consider the way that dance helps people shed the negative cultural and psychological effects of colonialism.

Michelle Wallace (1990) and Greg Tate (1992) have articulated the ongoing reluctance of curators, critics and artists in Euro-American and African-American intellectual camps to examine the vital role of African or Oceanic art in the development of modernism or the significant influence of European modernism in the evolution of African American art, Brenda Dixon Gottschild (2003) makes a similar argument concerning dance in the US. Rather than denying the interactions between modernist and 'other' aesthetics (Afro-Caribbean and South Asian, for example), some choreographers actively seek to explore this 'in-between space'. Therefore, it is necessary for me to interrogate the relevance and the historical and cultural specificity of aesthetics, classicism, modernism and postmodernism for this study. Khan, Jeyasingh, Khoo, Phoenix, Hylton and Lawal are producing innovative dance

productions, but not necessarily with the same ideologies that drove white Western modernism and postmodernist choreography. The work of these artists/companies deserves greater respect than such hegemonic terms provide. Consideration should be taken for the artistic, social and historical context of the dance to provide greater acknowledgement and understanding of the artistic and strategic choices that they are making in order to critique underlying assumptions and their positioning within the British context.

Thus, whilst using postcolonial theory I will also utilise Randy Martin's concept of overreading (1998) to understand the artists/companies work in context:

Overreading rests on the assumption that the subtext displayed in the dancing accounts for more than that particular aesthetic activity...overreading has a double significance, to read more in the dance than its dancing can bear to read through and past the dance to the point where it meets its own exterior or context (1998: 178).

The use of overreading will allow for a narration of the artistic and aesthetic qualities evident and critical to the dance work; an attempt to theorise the context and identification of how the social, political, cultural and historical context is inscribed in the work. It is the assumption that what is critical in art is displayed vigorously when it reflects on its own exterior, or, as Lisa Doolittle (Doolittle & Flynn 2000) has argued, that choreography reveals power relations within and surrounding dance. This thesis is about reading the choreography (in the broadest sense, incorporating decisions about structure, content and performance context) and seeing the experiences of Khoo, Khan, Jeyasingh, Phoenix, Hylton and Lawal as postcolonial

artists as a 'form of theory' (Dolan 2001: 133). It is about establishing the significance of the artists' work, whilst they operate within the history of a society coming to terms with changes through cultural diversity, multiculturalism and cultural equity, and a dance canon which is one-dimensional and dominated by European and American aesthetics.

### **Interrogation of terms**

Ideas about authenticity, tradition, classicism and history do not automatically generate or rely upon consensus. Rather, each of these concepts has a range of possible definitions that performers draw upon and deploy in different ways.

Individual dancers diverge in their understanding of what the most important aspect of the work should be, how best to express their allegiance to a chosen concept, and what elements of dance practice should be maintained or revived.

### **Modernism and Dance**

While some in the West see a modernist paradigm consolidating in the second half of the twentieth century, there are other countries where modernism does not make a crucial breakthrough until around or after the mid twentieth century. In essence, the Euro-American definition and concept of modernism, is different for people across the global context. However, the concept has a role to play that extends beyond any single linguistic or cultural confines. Postcolonial development calls for deconstructing modernist assumptions which equate non-sustainable development with progress. The debates about the distinction and interaction between the



concepts of modernism and the avant-garde, or the links between modernism and postmodernism cannot be overlooked. These differences must be highlighted to make it possible to allow a modernist concept with sufficient diversity. It was on the basis of modernism's ability to incorporate the problematic of cultural difference within its mainstream that modernism was able to claim its universality, spreading its wings over the world and providing the contexts for other cultures to enter into a discourse that claimed progress and advancement. It has already been highlighted that there are problems concerning issues around aesthetic autonomy. In the same way, to keep the significance of the modernist movement, there needs to be links between aesthetics, culture and socio-historical factors.

Susan Stanford Friedman (2007) has examined the concept of modernist internationalism and questions its established borders. Friedman calls into question the assumption of 'the West' as the centre of modernism's cultural production and suggests possibilities for a broadening of the concept and canon of modernism so as to avoid projecting established parameters onto 'the other'. In a bid to do justice, on their own terms, to the developments of modernity and the various modernisms produced in other parts of the world, Friedman suggests the development of transnational strategies that bring together the local specificities of aesthetic production and socio-historical contexts. Friedman rejects a centralising and hierarchical view of modernism; instead she elevates the agencies and creative capacities of all cultures by creating a view of modernism which resembles a web of mobile and interactive agents.

To continue the debate, Rey Chow (1993) also argues that there is confusion over the status of modernism as theoretical determinant and as social effect. To think of modernism as social effect is to continue the progressive goals of the European Enlightenment, whereas to think of modernism as theoretical determinant is to refer to it as a set of beliefs and a particular type of subjectivity. Modernism is still an ideological legacy, as habit and as a familiar, even coherent, way of seeing. For the countries and societies that have had to endure modernism under colonialism, they are still living through it as a cultural 'trauma' and devastation. In *The Black Atlantic* (1993), Paul Gilroy described the Black 'counter-cultures of modernity' that emerge in the space between nationalistic thinking and the 'rhizomorphic, fractal structure of the transcultural, international formation' (1993: 4) that is nationalism's antithesis. For those who endured colonialism, these people have created a cultural nationalism that informs their identity. Gilroy argues that Black identities cannot be understood in terms of being British, nor can they be grasped in terms of ethnic absolutism; rather, they should be understood in terms of the black diaspora of the Atlantic. Cultural exchange within the black diaspora produces hybrid identities. This involves cultural forms of similarity and difference within and between the various locales of the diaspora. Further, black self-identities and cultural expressions utilise a plurality of histories. Blackness is not a pan-global absolute identity, since the cultural identities of Black Britains, Black Americans and Black Africans are different. Nevertheless, Gilroy points to historically shared cultural forms within the Black Atlantic. Gilroy's term, the 'Black Atlantic', emphasises that the modernism of the European enlightenment took a different meaning when one considered how Black artists and intellectuals experienced it and considered the implications.

The broad issue of modernity is itself a tangle, especially in dance and in Asia, where issues of modernisation have been a part of a national discourse since Independence in India, and the revolution of China; whereas most often in the UK, discourse has been about innovating and protecting the 'greatness' of Britain. For the latter half of the twentieth century, visual arts functioned as the trendsetter for the modernist avant-garde, with Clement Greenberg's definition of modernism increasingly holding strong. Greenberg's definition was that the true modernist artist must 'purify' their art by stripping away anything and everything extraneous to the underlying nature of the medium (1961). It was this purist and minimalist conception of modernism that was the backdrop for much of the scholarly discourse on Merce Cunningham's distinctive contemporary classicism (Copeland 2004: 104). Many dance historians have drawn on Greenberg's account of modernism in the visual arts to theorise the modernism of modern and postmodern dance, including in different ways Sally Banes (1987), Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen (1983), Stephanie Jordan (1992), David Michael Levin (1999) and Roger Copeland (2004). It has been argued that modernism is a progression from one generation to another, reacting against the aesthetic paradigms of their predecessors and progressing towards a goal of pure abstraction. There have been attempts in dance scholarship to highlight the issue of the exclusionary capacity of this modernist paradigm because of the prejudicial aesthetic criteria to artists of colour (for example Susan Manning 2004). In her study of modern dance, Manning was able to highlight the way in which Black artists, in particular, were expected to produce 'natural' and 'spontaneous' movement, and this assumption either barred them from dance making or else discredited their compositional labour. Thus John Martin<sup>23</sup> frequently rated African

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<sup>23</sup> John Martin was a dance critic for the *New York Times* from 1927 to 1962 and played a significant role in

American choreographers who followed the modern dance approach to choreography as 'derivative' rather than 'original artists'; whereas, when they foregrounded Africanist elements, he, along with other critics, considered them 'natural performers' rather than 'creative performers' (Manning 2004: 1-55).

For the diasporic communities in Britain who are negotiating identities, notions of acculturation and assimilation feed into their dance making; there have been criticisms that homogeneity and integration are necessary for a society. Benedict Anderson (1991) has argued that modern nations are imagined communities, constructed from popular processes through which residents share nationality in common. However, 'the nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations' (1991: 7). To have one nation means that there must be another against which self-definition can be constructed. Anderson is thus arguing for the social constructions of nations as political entities that have a limited social and demographic extent, rather than being organic, external entities. There is also an underlying modernist fascination with otherness within ideologies of acculturation and assimilation. Thus, national identity can be 'invented' and the postcolonial dance artists/companies can find new possibilities and subversive potential within the 'system'.

Partha Chatterjee (1993) contends that the imagination of political communities has been limited by European colonialism. Having had specifically nationalist institutional

forms imposed on them as colonies, upon independence these areas had no option but to follow European paths, with Western powers ready to prevent any seemingly dangerous deviations: 'Even our imaginations must remain forever colonised' (Chatterjee 1993: 5). Further, Chatterjee argues that nations and nationalism operated within limits formulated in Europe, and thus they can only be conceptualised within these European structures. Anti-colonial nationalism thus typically opposed colonialism using the same nationalist arguments as the colonialists. Distinction could not be made through political or economic conceptualisation due to the European dominance of these realms and thus the limited sovereignty and territory of the colony was already imagined by the colonised for the colonisers. Thus, anti-nationalism can only be imagined through cultural processes and practices. To recognise the 'other', negated, side of modernity is to be drawn away from the single base line of 'development' and 'progress' against which the rest is measured. It can be argued that for postcolonial dance artists/companies in Britain who use 'traditional cultural' dance forms, that they are employing oppositional strategies to critique colonialism.

### **Modernity in the context of Colonialism**

Araeen has argued that there is 'something deeply entrenched within the European colonial psyche [which] prevents it from recognising equally the intellectual ability of other human beings within modernity' (2010: 22-3). The dialogue between Europe and the rest of the world has been problematic and remains complex today. 'Other' cultures have been unable to find their place subjectively in history or as equal partners within the dialogue. However, postcolonial work, it can be argued, is

predominantly a direct response to the aesthetic tradition of modernity. Since the mid 1970s, postcolonial theory, especially in respect to Edward Said, Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak's seminal work, has set out to deconstruct modernity's racist ideology of 'otherness' and colonialist stereotypes. Recently, the work of Walter Dignolo (2000) has relocated the beginnings of modernity to early colonialism in the sixteenth century rather than European Enlightenment, and has situated its development in the triangular space of Europe, Africa and the Americas. This shift in focus enables Dignolo to analyse and dismantle modernity's capitalist philosophy of oppressive exploitation and denial of cultural difference from the Renaissance onwards and to re-read cultural contact along the lines of various non-European cosmologies. In Western culture, colonialism in the Atlantic World established a modern 'tradition' of derogatory or ambivalent stereotyping still prevalent in many contemporary, almost neo-primitivist cultural performances ranging from literature, film and television, to performance and theatre. At the same time, recent refugee and migratory movements attempt to relocate ancestral performative knowledge (traditional and modern) of the Atlantic World to renew a complex global archive of subversive cross-cultural theories combined with modernist philosophy of self-expression and identity. Contemporary performance culture thus appears to build on 'tradition' as much as 'innovation' as it revises modernity 'beyond the colour line' (Gilroy 2000). As Awam Amkpa writes, in regards to African playwrights after the passing of the British Empire:

No amount of assimilation to Anglo-European norms could place Africans at the centre of European modernity. The colonised remained trapped in what I describe as an 'inter-modernist' landscape on the margins of what modernity, bounded by English constructions of race (2004: 5).

The globalisation of modernity has impacted on national cultures around the globe in multiple and unexpected ways. Bhabha's definition of modernity (1994) argues that a historical narrative of alterity that explores forms of social antagonism and contradiction that are not yet properly represented, political identities in the process of being formed, cultural enunciations in hybridity, in the process of translating cultural differences. Further, according to this definition, Bhabha argues that, the reason the modernist model of colonialism is condemned to failure is not only because it needs the Other (the colonised) to validate its supremacy, but also because it engages in what Bhabha refers to as 'contra-modernity': modernity in 'colonial conditions where its imposition is itself the denial of historical freedom, civic autonomy and the "ethical" choice of refashioning' (1994: 241). It has been Bhabha's attempt to constitute a postcolonial, critical discourse that contests modernity through the establishment of other historical sites, other forms of enunciation.

### **Postmodernism and Dance**

Initially a reaction to modernism, postmodernism embraces ambiguity and complexity. When the idea of a reaction or rejection of modernism was borrowed by other fields, it became synonymous in some contexts with postmodernity. The term is closely linked with poststructuralism and with modernism, in terms of a rejection of its bourgeois, elitist culture. Michel Foucault (1975) is amongst these poststructuralist thinkers and has read society as constituted from de-centered systems, and has described power not as a hegemony, but as multiplicities, localities

of activities, spaces in which resistance and subversion are always at work. This notion of multiplicity is central to accounts of postmodernity.

Broadly, postmodernity can be seen as a response to the social and economic shifts evident in late capitalist society. It is this shift that has resulted in the 'commodification of culture'. Some theorists, like Jean Baudrillard, argue that, as a result of this, critical distance is no longer possible, and that 'instead of producing meaning [culture] exhausts itself in the staging of meaning' (Quoted in Auslander 1987: 32). Other theorists, such as Fredric Jameson for example, contest this position. Jameson in *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) argued that, under postmodernism, historicity dissolved. The past presented itself only as a commodifiable pastiche. Postmodernism, in Jameson's account, meant the flattening out of all historically conditioned realities that constitute the vehicle of social reconstruction. This process exposes the ways in which things are socially constructed and therefore inherently political. Nietzsche, however, was the first to analyse modernism's preoccupation with breaking with the past in his 'The Parable of the Madman' in *The Gay Science* (1882) and challenged us 'not to be arrogant about the superiority of the past' (Hoy and McCarthy 1994). In essence, postmodernism therefore, is the understanding that there is no escape from the historicity of the sign. In terms of individual creativity it means that it is no longer necessary to separate ourselves from our past: 'A core notion in the contemporary debates about postmodernism is the idea that the creative possibilities of modernism are exhausted' (Marcus in Devereaux and Hillman 1995). The great mark of postmodernism according to Peter Brinson (1991) is its erosion of the line between art and commercial forms, combined with a tendency to eliminate the past, to live



only for now. This means that at times, artists fall into an ambiguous place in society, not articulating or questioning how their work fits into the broader social framework of which they are a part. The art community believes in freedom of expression, so audiences should be unafraid to deconstruct images that are placed in front of them to ultimately consider the possible effects in terms of relations, for example. In a refusal to contextualise the work historically, audiences contribute to the relegation of art to the sphere of entertainment and commodification: 'In our resistance to confronting the content of a work and the emotions it generates, we make it easier for the work to be rendered impotent and vulnerable' (Becker 1990: 6).

Due to the nature of postmodern performance and its devices of intertextuality and parody, performance is able to problematise once accepted operations of power (see Briginshaw 1996). Thus, it is necessary to highlight the constructed nature of the representations inherent in postmodern performance. It is my contention that the constructed identity of postcolonial artists and reactions to dominant power structures (such as those underlying ACE labels and its cultural policy) are evident in the work of second or third generation British Asian or Black British dancers; since it is work that manages to challenge some of the underlying ideologies of the dance world (because of its engagement with an alternative account of modernism and postmodernism, for example) but can be seen as comfortable within the existing social system, it is able to unmask basic contradictions. Valerie Briginshaw argues that:

When the conventions of performance and representation are exposed, it is like seeing everything in inverted commas. What has previously been seen as 'natural' or 'real' is exposed as 'cultural' or socially constructed revealing the ideologically grounded status of representation (1996: 127).

There has not been much interest in postmodernism within African and Caribbean studies, but some Africanists have questioned in general the utility of applying postmodernist interpretations of the study of Africa, whilst others not only view the application of postmodernism to colonial discourse with scepticism, but even see it as a threat to long-entrenched traditions of historical methodology in African studies (see Bozzoli 1992, Vaughan 1994). In terms of British based artists who are Black, postmodern is often characterised by the inevitable recognition of disruption in a continuing tradition, the marking of difference between the diasporic cultural formations and aesthetics, images of 'tradition', and the negotiations that mark the reconstitution of blackness as a vital, if shifting signifier.

Especially with black dance there are assumptions that the 'instinctiveness' of the performers, spiritual and traditional notions, which makes these bodies mute and passive; a body of cultural preservation or a body that can be theorised by others. Therefore, in the cases of Lawal, Hylton and Phoenix, it will be necessary to consider how they are able to manifest this; whilst Lawal's body is more about cultural preservation and innovation, Phoenix's body of work which has changed due to Artistic Directors and cultural policies means that the 'body' has not always been able to provide comment and subversion to dominant assumptions about 'black bodies'. Susan Bordo (1993) has argued that postmodernity manifests itself in popular culture in a fetishisation of choice, the relentless production of novelty

through the proliferation of 'new' consumer items. Thus, this restricts and obscures differential locations within this availability of choice and questions of access, and effectively constitutes the eradication of choice. In reflecting about shifting locations, Stuart Hall argues:

Thinking about my own sense of identity, I realise that it has always depended on the fact of being a migrant, on the *difference* from the rest of you. So one of the fascinating things about this discussion is to find myself centered at last. Now that, in the postmodern age, you all feel so dispersed, I became centered. What I've thought of as dispersed and fragmented comes, paradoxically, to be the representative modern experience! This is 'coming home' with a vengeance! (1988: 44).

It is clear from the analyses included in this thesis in the following chapters that several British Asian and British based artists who are Black have responded to the white Western postmodern with irony: as articulations of forms and modalities that, because of directly opposite histories, have always already been their experience. A radical postmodern aesthetic emerging from the artists and scholars like this, is necessarily different from the white Western postmodern paradigms; the search is different, as also the goal, as has historically been the case.

Sally Banes (1994), amongst others, has written extensively about postmodern dance in America. This history has focused primarily on the dancers of the Judson Dance Theatre, and has gone through several stages of development. One of the most consistent characteristics seems to be the focus on experimentation to de-essentialise concepts of artistic validity which stretches the given limits of dance. Thus, it is surprising that despite the bold innovative elements in the works of several

black choreographers (such as Eleo Pomare, Talley Beatty and Carole Johnson); their political engagement in thematic material, their interest in breaking down boundaries between high and low art, their interest in working across genres and boundaries, is not considered and analysed in terms of postmodernism in great detail (the only exception that I am aware of is Gottschild in *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance* (1996)). This work enables a new understanding of postmodern dance as they signal departures from the conventions of modern dance traditions, certainly in terms of hybridity, fragmentation, and the breakdown of the fabrication that cultural purity is certain. However, this is not to say that there is a great connection between the artistic or political innovations of the Euro-American postmodern choreographers and those of 'other' communities.

Under the scrutiny of internal nationalist and conservative agendas and with the gaze of the West, forms are legitimised as 'traditional' and glorified because of the notion of 'authenticity', while contemporary forms of artistic production are often charged with being under the influence of the West. Fredric Jameson has conceptualised that the postmodern consciousness might not amount to much more than 'theorising its own conditions of possibility' (1991: i). For Jameson then, it might best be characterised as a self-reflexivity turning in on itself to locate events which make a break. The awareness of the conditions of its own possibility also makes for a re-examination of history and the past in ways that lead to restaging notions of cultural specificities and differences. Thus, the postmodern in dance does not focus on searching for something 'new' that will overturn a set of cultural practices, a gesture of rebellion in the tradition of Euro-American innovation, but is a constantly negotiated search. This search is dependent on a politics that is arrived at through

contemporary life situations, which also means that the postmodern is conceived on local terms and not under universal assumptions. Both British Asian work and work by British based artists who are Black needs to be understood as a product of the colonial encounter, rather than as Kwame Appiah notes as 'the simple continuation of an indigenous tradition [or] a mere intrusion more from the metropole' (Appiah 1992: 69-70); and which risks merely supplanting the Western-academic 'rhetoric of alterity' with a form of 'ersatz exoticism', through which Africans vainly attempt to assert their cultural autonomy by fashioning themselves 'as the image of the other' (ibid: 72). For Appiah, it is pointless trying to forget Europe by erasing the European traces of African's past: 'since it is too late for us to escape each other, we might instead seek to turn our advantage the mutual interdependencies history has thrust upon us' (ibid: 72). These arguments can also be applied to the British Asian circumstance.

The refusal of the Euro-American mainstream, however, subtle, to recognise the postmodernism in the work of artists and choreographers of colour is not unrelated to the earlier 'forgetfulness' regarding the influences and inspirations of dance traditions produced by 'other' cultures in the creation of Euro-American modern dance and assumptions about its self-contained aesthetic. To utilise the classification of the term 'postmodern' in relation to the work considered in this thesis is to classify it politically, which is reflected in choices and artistic form and content, and not just as an aesthetic category.

## **Classicism and dance in relation to the nationalist project**

In terms of Euro-American art and dance discourses, classicism denotes an aesthetic attitude and an artistic tradition. The aesthetics of classicism in western art are rooted in European re-imaginings of classical antiquity as a model of perfection in European culture, European identity and European imaginings of the Western past. Classicism, in the Euro-American discourse, defines itself as universal. For example, when the first explosions of dance modernism hit the European stage via Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes (1909-1929), André Levinson maintained that 'classical dance is a world of countless possibilities' (Levinson in Levinson & Acocella 1991: 10) and would absorb or rise above the savage and discordant attractions of modernism. Classical dance had already converted everything worthwhile the ancient Greeks had to offer, and need not respond unduly to faddish attempts at reform (1991: 11).

Alessandra Lopez y Royo has argued that classicism in the Euro-American discourse defines itself as universal, and that there is only room for this one type of classicism. She continues that there are other 'classicisms', all of which have come about as a result of the colonial encounter: 'modelled on western classicism yet, and inevitably, so different' (2003: 160). With an implicit hierarchy, western classicism is seen as a prototype. The Euro-American notion of classicism as both artistic category and artistic mode has been transplanted and localised in non-western contexts and has become a way of articulating a universal view of art as striving for progress, in what Mitter calls 'the universal validity of artistic teleology' (Mitter 2001: 1).

With these arguments in mind, it can be seen that there is obvious difficulty in regards to classicism in the diasporic context. It is easier, for example, for people in India who engage with classicism to ignore and withstand the pressure of Western classicism as they are making work in a 'home' context, but it becomes more difficult for British South Asians to do so in Britain, with the hegemonic paradigm of a western defined classicism so obviously unconcealed. If the existence of other 'classicisms' are recognised, the reception of such work under Western defined classicism will nullify any internal politics or understanding. An understanding of the particular 'classicism' in operation and a reading of 'other' aesthetics will allow for a more appropriate and deeper response to the work.

Dance classicism does not pertain only to ballet, but is seen in modernist reformulations, interpreted as recognition of the existence of 'an impersonal tradition' (Copeland 2004). Chatterjee has argued that when the concept of classical is translated and re-located to a non-western context, this is a process of national cultural formation (1993). The term classical is superimposed on indigenous systems of classification and applied to artistic forms which are turned into normative models, bringing into existence what was silent or non-existent through external powers. As Roger Copeland has argued, a classicist is someone who:

Recognises the limits of self-expression, the sort of artist who conceives of creativity not as pure, unlimited personal invention, but as a *collaboration* between his own subjectivity and some impersonal tradition, set of laws, or pre-existing system of technique (2004: 110).

Although the roots of ballet are firmly located in France, the development of ballet is seen as an international project. It can thus be argued that ballet is transnational. It is consequently perceived to be universal, which in this sense makes ballet 'a-cultural'. Yet, Bharata Natyam is also transnational<sup>24</sup> (there is now an established Imperial Society of the Teachers of Dancing syllabus for Bharata Natyam and Kathak dance, for example), but remains rooted in a specific image of an ancient Indian culture, despite the historical fact that it has been largely constructed in the 1930s. Thus, audience's expectations are dependent less on inherent aesthetic qualities, and more on the idea of cultural 'authenticity'. Allegiance to classicism in Bharata Natyam is wedded to notions of uniformity, and manifested, in the context of Indian dance, through representations of purity of line and appropriateness. The form, especially in its amateur practice, provides a means for immigrants to maintain their social identity in diaspora; in Arjun Appadurai's (1996) terms, this involves intentional cultural reproduction and, thus, the reiteration of their homeland's culture in diaspora. This can trivialise performance, so that it becomes representative of 'Indianness', and there is no conception of a wider culturally diverse theatre and dance practice. It is, however, imperative to have an understanding of the history within its colonial and postcolonial context, of any art form in order to understand the significance of current choreographic and reconstruction practices.

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<sup>24</sup> Kalpana Mukunda Iyengar has argued that a Bharatanatyam dancer is a transnational interpreter, who helps teach Asian Indian students their culture, religion, history, heritage and literature through the medium of dance (2014: 51).



The postcolonial celebration of hybridity and the disconnecting of people and place has generated discussions about the constructed nature of categories and a questioning of authenticity. Struggles of different groups of people that seek to insert themselves in particular places, assert belonging and register oppositional politics of location to find a 'home'. Their predicament draws attention to the danger of overlooking the historical and lived experiences of marginalised people who resist their displacedness in complex ways.

The term 'classicism' may not be entirely appropriate in the discussion of all work of British based dancers who are Black, the notion of 'tradition' may be more applicable. Until fairly recently, black classicism has been a very disparate field of research, although the scholar Shelley Haley has been publishing and speaking about black classicism for several decades (Haley 1989, 1993). Two recent studies have focused on classicism in African American literature and culture (Rankine 2006 and Walters 2007), and another has examined black classicism in the visual art of African American artist Romare Bearden (O'Meally 2007). O'Meally's study of Bearden's *Odysseus Suite* reveals Bearden to be an artist of the black diaspora, who took his visual symbols and colour palette from Africa, the Mediterranean and the Caribbean, while his method fused 'high' European art with Jazz composition and the 'lowlier' scissor-work of collage. A quotation from O'Meally neatly illustrates the shift away from a positivist, historical focus on blackness in Graeco-Roman antiquity to the presence of blackness in a composite, classical tradition. Another important development in the study of black classicism has been the increased attention paid to the history of black classical scholarship. Here Michele Valerie Ronnick's contribution has been substantial. Aside from the two works introduced here,

Ronnick has published widely on African American classicists. However, it is Ronnick's edition of the *Autobiography* of the black classicist, William Sanders Scarborough, and her separate edition of his *Works* (2006) that have had the greatest impact on the field. The significance of Ronnick's study is apparent when one considers an article by Robert Fikes, Jr, published in volume 53 of *The Negro Educational Review* (Fikes 2002), in which he gives a short biographical and bibliographical overview of the tradition of black classicism and the careers of black classicists.

Patrice Rankine contests that 'the current phenomenon of the study of black classicism represents a yearning toward the discourse of race within classical studies' (2006: 20). This claim begs interesting questions about the internationalism of black classicism and, as a corollary, the internationalism of blackness. Potentially black classicism encompasses a much larger field and differential receptions; it will be interesting to see how tropes worked out in relation to the black experience in America interact with tropes in the arts of Africa, the Caribbean and Europe. There are unlikely points of contact between the black tradition and the classical tradition, as black internationalism can be used to critique the universalism of the classical tradition, and vice versa. Black classicism does not propose a model for the classical tradition: the tradition is stronger for its ability to appeal to different cultural traditions which are anyway profoundly interconnected. Thus, although there has been scholarship about black classicism, I do not feel it appropriate to utilise the term in examining Black dance forms, and feel that the terms 'traditional' is more consistent with the language used by artists and scholars. For the British based artists/companies who are Black to be analysed, tradition refers not to the

hierarchical and legitimating systems, but to continual indigenous cultural practices. It is my contention that it is about a conscious and deliberate location in the systems that are a part of the context, as it is a reaction to the conflation of contemporary choreography with 'Westernisation'. As the classical arts are no longer the conduits through which cultural knowledge is passed on and perceptions are shaped or a diverse population, the question arises as to what the cultural value really is. What will become apparent in my examination of the reconstruction of Bharata Natyam and Kathak dance in Chapter 3 is that there is a disruption of the single ideology of these forms as the high culture of an authentic Indian identity.

### **'Tradition'**

The notions of 'identity' and 'tradition', in themselves are not particularly useful, unless we emphasise identity- and tradition-in-the-making. As the Jamaican anthropologist David Scott observed:

A tradition...seeks to connect authoritatively, within the structure of its narrative, a relation among past, community and identity. A tradition therefore is never neutral with respect to the values it embodies. Rather a tradition operates in and through the stakes it constructs (cited in Hall 1999: 14).

As part of the nationalist project; a unifying collectivity has meant the careful selection from multiple histories. A national 'memory' is the subject of Ernest Renan's 1882 essay 'What is a nation?'. Renan is emphatic that 'forgetting...is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation' (1990: 11). Renan is particularly Eurocentric in his focus, but his perception that where 'national memories are concerned, griefs

are of more value than triumphs, for they impose duties and require a common effort' resonates in the colonial situation where nationalists repeatedly invoke the idea of glorious pre-colonial traditions (symbolised by 'culture', the family, language, religion and women) which have been trampled upon by the colonial invader. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition* (1992) has documented how many so-called traditions are not traditional at all, but are continually re-invented by colonialists as well as nationalists who constantly engage with one another's creations in order to reinforce or challenge authority. Indeed, in many parts of the colonised world, not just traditions, but nations themselves, were invented by colonialists. These newly created nations drastically altered previous conceptions of the community, or of the past. For example, 'Classical' dances of India were frequently legitimised through appropriation by the urban elite, and ultimately these forms, instead of simply becoming accepted in the public domain as performance traditions, really entered the cultural market as representations of 'tradition' that could be brokered primarily by performers from the upper classes.

Stigmatising cultural stereotypes mean that non-Western cultures can be regarded as unified wholes and unchanging cultures, but they possess dance traditions that are worthy of study and documentation by Westerners. Anthea Kraut (2009) argues that these dance traditions are conventionally conceived and created and maintained by communities of anonymous producers. In contrast, Western forms such as ballet and contemporary dance are made up of discrete works with individual, identifiable

authors, whose innovators propel their forms forward<sup>25</sup>. Joann Kealiinohumoku also addressed the marginalisation of folk and non-Western dance forms and how they have endured in US universities by proposing to look at the unmarked form of ballet as an ethnic form in her famous essay 'An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a form of Ethnic Dance' (1983). Further, Kealiinohumoku refers to the typical association of choreography within individual innovation by observing that among the Hopi Indians of Northern Arizona, there is no practice of naming a choreographer. This does not mean however that this is not the case, and within a Kiva group or a society, people know who made certain innovations to the dance form and why (1983: 36). Thus, Kealiinohumoku has been able to question the tendency to envision 'traditional' dances as unchanging, and prompts the reader to consider whether the concept of choreography can include dance forms that are authorless, improvised and collaborative.

Further, this new conception of choreography also secured a special place for dances authored by a single artist as distinct from forms of dance practiced worldwide that could not be traced to a single creator. Implementing the opposition also practiced in anthropology between tradition and innovation, modern dance choreographers claimed that the movement vocabularies they devised were entirely new (artists such as Martha Graham and Helen Tamiris felt empowered with their white bodies taking on alternative racial and ethnic identities in the performance of *Negro Spirituals*, Native American dances and Cakewalks for example, because the choreographer was an artist who could tap the universal fundamentals that all

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<sup>25</sup> Drawing from the work of Joann Kealiinohumoku, Susan Leigh Foster (2009) has discussed the way in which the early twentieth-century emergence of the term 'choreography' in the United States functioned to authorise modern dance's individual creator and exclude racialised bodies and practitioners of 'world' forms.

movement shares, they could dance out the concerns and values of all people of colour (see Manning 2004)). Although they borrowed extensively from Native American, Asian and 'Negro' forms, they distanced themselves from these 'unchanging' and 'deeply embedded' forms even as they were becoming more familiar.

It is for the reasons discussed above, that African dance is often labelled as 'traditional'. Traditional African dances or performances generally could be subsumed under traditional festivals, which Ogunda (1978: 4) defines as an indigenous cultural institution, a form of art nurtured on the African soil over the centuries and which has therefore developed distinctive features and whose techniques are totally different. Non-African scholars have used the word traditional to describe African artistic practices which are expressed using indigenous images and practices and are assumed to have a connection to the area's precolonial past (Barber 1997: 1). On the other end of the binary are modern, Westernised elite practices. Some scholarship frames traditional art practices and elite art practices on a chronological scale, as if elite dance practices have evolved and grown out of static traditional practices. According to this rhetoric, Karin Barber reflects that 'the traditional is frozen in place as the origin or influence, which is co-opted to authenticate the modern by providing it with roots' (1997: 2). Therefore, there has been an assumption that all African dance is traditional, which is in opposition to contemporary and 'modern'. Most contemporary scholars now reject this simplistic binary; Mary Arnoldi argues that many scholars' work still seems to assume that all traditional arts practices in Africa operate on a similar trajectory and rate of change, thus tacitly lumping all these practices together in one group instead of

acknowledging the highly differentiated and diverse practices that occur even within one distinct community (1995: 80).

The traditional could also refer to the ritual, or religious, the religious aesthetics, and at times primarily focus on the aesthetics, while it relegates the religious elements to the background. This is in line with P. Adedotun Ogundeji's (2000: 14-22, 36) identification of three general types of 'traditional' theatre practice; these are the sacred ritual performances, the ritual festival performances and the deritualising performances (Dasylva 2006: 75), to which he later added a fourth category which he calls the deritualised performances. In the first, the religious and cultic functions are primary while the ritual function is secondary. In the last two categories, the ritual function is secondary; it is in the festival theatre that both the religio-cultic and aesthetic functions have equal emphasis. Aesthetics has been referred to as a mode of intellectual energy, when standards are applied to actual cases. In dance specifically, presentation is considered important in style, and African dance is particularly visually stimulating and capable of arousing emotional responses as well as visual ones. These are dependent on canons of dance aesthetics<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> Robert Farris Thompson, in *African Art in Motion* (1979), outlines ten of these canons. Orality is considered to be one of the vital components of African dance aesthetics. Molefi and Kariamu Asante, in *African Culture: Rhythms of Unity* (1985), provide seven aesthetic senses of African dance, amongst which dimensionality, comprising of texture and something extra, in African dance. 'Orality' provokes collectiveness in terms of spirit, and individuality in terms of artistry.

## **‘Reconstruction’**

‘Classical’ cultural dance practices, such as Bharata Natyam and Kathak<sup>27</sup>, continue to have a changing narrative as a result of colonialism, globalisation, new media and local politics. Thus, an examination of how politics and history have shaped these dance forms is necessary to understand how individuals have found agency in the practice of these forms, whilst operating within the broader context of Britain and the world today. Revisionist approaches to history offer different perspectives than were stated at the time, which also cause a questioning of the subconscious responses that may have gone into the choices and responses of the past. The destabilising or deconstructing of popularity held assumptions about the significance of dance practices in the past, causes us to question how dance is interpreted in the present.

## **Chapter 2: Conclusion**

Modernism and postmodernism have inherently incorporated concepts of innovation and progress, which belongs to Western forms. If it is acknowledged that non-white ‘other’ forms are cutting-edge or innovative, it is said to be because of western modernisation. It is clear, then, that these are all ideological categories which inherently share ethnocentricity. It is also clear that these conditions exist to different degrees all over the globe and that they do so simultaneously. It is not the case that any one of these conditions exists in isolation in one geographical area or cultural context. It is essential that interconnection between a range of common variables are

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<sup>27</sup> These particular Indian dance forms are examined further in the Chapter 3 because Bharata Natyam is utilised within the work of Khoo and Jeyasingh, and Kathak is used within the work of Khan. Both dance forms are classical and Bharata Natyam in particular is seen to be most privileged in terms of study, research and popularity. As will be highlighted later in this thesis, these forms have been institutionalised in the UK particularly through the addition to these two forms within the Imperial Society of Dance’s portfolio of dance syllabi.



employed and considered when analysing the work of the dance artists/companies. It is not only a question of understanding the concepts interrogated throughout this chapter in relation to these dancers/choreographers who are negotiating a colonial past and a Western hierarchy, but also about 'trusting the paradigms within which they are presented' (Carter 1998: 13): this is the complex context in which their work is situated. Although cultural identity is undoubtedly a very significant consideration and a thought provoking part of the work of the artists/companies included for analysis in this thesis, they are also making 'serious' art which can be seen to be innovative and questions the dominant paradigm.

## Chapter 3

### South Asian Dance

This chapter examines the context of South Asian dance in Britain, before aiming to demonstrate how the chosen case studies are able to disrupt normative ideologies whilst also being aware and conscious of the history and development of the Indian dance forms they choose to use. The two most popular classical dance forms of India: Bharata Natyam and Kathak, have been a significant part in the Indian nationalist project and are now being used innovatively by postcolonial artists such as Khoo, Jeyasingh and Khan in Britain, these being the case studies considered in this chapter. The growing South Asian diasporic voice has brought into question the flows of cultural and economic capital reconfiguring the boundaries that make critiques of ethnocentricity problematic. On the other hand, some members of the South Asian community in the UK (such as Nahid Siddiqui) can be highly conservative and engage in their own Indian nostalgia. Within this current context of terrorism, demonization of Islam and the associated face of 'brownness', it can be questionable as to whether these artists can really present something alternative. However, the treatment of techniques and an understanding of Indian localised ways of seeing will demonstrate the subversive properties of the work of the artists included for analysis. The contemporary struggles can only be addressed through the re-narration of histories, not only in Britain, but very importantly in relation to the Indian subcontinent. Thus, the first half of this chapter will begin with an examination of the historical development of these forms. Bharata Natyam and Kathak have already been through development and change, so the presentation and reading of these forms as an ancient, classical form is misleading. The form of Bharata Natyam that we now see is neo-classical, not classical; it is already modernised. The second

half of this chapter will examine the key issues arising from the work of the South Asian case studies and what strategies they have developed during the time period 1983-2008.

### **Bharata Natyam**

In the 1980s, the antiquity of Bharata Natyam was being questioned in Britain by those artists who had gone on to Higher Education and had been introduced to critical thinking and historical research. The notion of 'antiquity as legitimacy' was being questioned (Erdman 1992: 297), and there was a realisation that Bharata Natyam was actually a 'contemporary interpretation' of an initial form. The forced transnationalism of colonialism had introduced European, universalist, post-Enlightenment values to Indian social life, which, in turn prompted the reform of Indian cultural traditions and social practices. Janet O Shea's research (2007) into the history of Bharata Natyam puts forward that the form underwent two major transformations in the twentieth century: an early century revival and a late century critical reflection on that revival. In both periods, dancers put forth, in choreographic form, different versions of the past, which articulated concerns of gender, nationality and regionalism. It seems that Bharata Natyam has entered a new period in which performers embrace transformation and engage actively with the globality of the form. For many, however, questions of politics remain at the crux of inquiry into the boundaries of Bharata Natyam.

Essentially, there are two schools of thought about the history of Bharata Natyam. Primarily, post-Independence performers and scholars based in India view Bharata Natyam as a dance form with an ancient history. They believe that Bharata Natyam can be traced through sculptural artefacts, literary references, manuals for producing art (shastra) and aesthetic dialogues all the way back to 2000 BC (the Indus Valley civilisation) or to 200 BC with the detailed descriptions of an art dance in texts such as the Sanskrit *Natyashastra* and also in the Tamil tale of the third century *Silapaddikaram*. Another view, held by more recent performers and scholars, is that the historical continuities have been overplayed. The perception that Bharata Natyam has an authentic, unchanging tradition, is an orientalist one. The idea that it has been 'contaminated' by other influences and reconstructed is suppressed (Chakravorty 2000, Bose 1998).

There is also the view that the dancers that performed Bharata Natyam were prostitutes, and that Rukmini Devi Arundale brought respectability to the dance as an art form, as she was a Brahmin woman married to a professor and prominent activist within the Theosophical Society (see O'Shea 1998: 46). It is however argued that this perception is a result of a conflation of Victorian morals regarding social purity with Indian caste-based perceptions of purity and the body (Meduri 2005); some temple dancers were supported by designated sponsors which does not make them prostitutes, any more than a woman who has remarried, for example. In the process of reviving the dance form *sadīr* as Bharata Natyam, Rukmini Devi Arundale revised aspects of transmission and presentation for a new nationalistic, democratic and global context, so that this regional dance form came to be accepted as a representation of 'Indianness' (Coorlawala 2004).

## Kathak

The multiple genealogies of Kathak dance articulate a complex intersection of regional histories. This dance style is an amalgam of the folk and formalised court dances popular between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in India. According to Pallabi Chakravorty (2008: 26) the Bhakti and Sufi religious movements that swept India, along with the entertainment orientated performances patronised by the royal courts, shaped the repertoire of the dance. The folk traditions of the Jhumar and the Nachnis of Bengal and Bihar, the Ghumar of Rajasthan, the singing and dancing of the *katahaka* caste of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan and the Vaishnava sects of Bengal, the *kathavachaks* (storytellers) of North and East India and the court dances of the Mughal nawabs and the Hindu maharajas all come together to form Kathak. The quest for origins by modern scholars generally links the dance to Sanskrit sources and the Brahman *kathakars* but there is evidence within the practice to argue that there are Persian influences and courtesan contributions, while often unacknowledged. Dance historian Kapila Vatsyayan (1982: 90) claimed that Kathak originated with the Sufi trance dance of the Islamic dervishes. However, while the practices that became Bharata Natyam were predominantly from the South, it is largely accepted that Kathak dance that we are familiar with today was from the North; the area where Hindu and Muslim religions overlapped because of the Mughal Empire. The practice flourished in the Mughal and Hindu courts of Lucknow and Benares in Uttar Pradesh, Jaipur in Rajasthan and Raigarh in Madhya Pradesh during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Dance historian Mohan Khokar writes that ‘the one word, the name, by which Indian dance as we know today was known universally right into the first quarter of this century was *nautch*. “Nach”, the Hindustani word for dancing, became anglicised by the British colonisers as *Nautch*’ (1984: 19). Thus, modern Kathak should have been linked to the history of the nautch. The cultural landscape of nineteenth-century Bengal provides the historical background for rearticulating modern Kathak as the legacy of the nautch tradition of colonial India. This legacy has been completely marginalised in the ‘official representation’ of classical Kathak, which it is claimed, is the product of Brahman *kathakars* and patriarchal *gharanas*. In *Bells of Change: Kathak Dance, Women and Modernity in India* Pallabi Chakravorty has investigated that the revival of classical traditions during the nationalist movement led to the Sanskritisation and homogenisation of the heterodox tradition of Kathak.

The Orientalists and nationalists resurrected a pan-Indian classical dance from the ‘debased’ nautch tradition by basing the revival on a Sanskritised Vedic culture. The new impetus in this regard came from the discovery of the *Natyashastra* in 1865 by Edward Hall, followed by several other discoveries of its chapters in France, England and Germany. The publication of the text in the 1890s by Sylvian Levi, Pandits Shivadatta and Kashinath Pandurang Purab popularised it nationally and internationally (see Meduri 1996). As Meduri (ibid) and others have pointed out, Coomaraswamy’s *Dance of Shiva: Fourteen Indian Essays* (1957), was crucial in establishing the spiritual roots and antiquity of dance in Indian culture. Thus, the arts revival of the 1920s and 1930s was shaped by the nationalistic imagination of a ‘pure’ and ‘sacred’ tradition that could not include the Calcutta baijis or the devadasis in the project of nation building.

After the departure of the British from India in 1947, Kathak came out of the demi-monde and into prominence on the Indian stage. In the 1950s, it became permissible for men to take part. The revival of classical Indian dance during this time traces the origin of Kathak back to an invented vedic past, and links it to the Sanskrit texts *Natyashastra* and *Mahabharata*, and its genealogy is traced through early male lineages (Kothari 1989). After India's independence (1947), Kathak dance was institutionalised within the national academies in India as the authentic representation of a patriarchal Hindu national identity. The multiple genealogies of Kathak dance were homogenised into a single national narrative and the image of Krishna stripped of its hybrid and subversive history. The image of Krishna and the invocation of Bhakti in Kathak dance in modern India marginalises its secular history (see Chakravorty 2008). The dance has been repositioned as the dominant symbol of Hindu culture. Within this ongoing construction of Kathak, there are times of division that manifest a contested and fragmented national terrain. The subtle 'Hinduisation' of Kathak dance that continues in India, is a legacy of the past revivalist national ideology. Yet the competing forces of market and cultural identity create alternative spaces to articulate moments of division.

### **British South Asian Dance: Context**

The present day form of Bharata Natyam in the UK continues to demonstrate the opposing views on reconstruction that the pioneers had in the 1930s/40s. There are varying and sometimes contradictory visions of South Asian dance in Britain. The legendary dancer T. Balasaraswati (1918-1984), like Ram Gopal and Uday Shankar,

performed internationally and gained recognition within the mainstream of transnational dance milieu. Shankar and Gopal worked with ballet, whilst Balasraswati travelled in the world of modern dance (see Knight 2010), involving herself with contemporary dance training and venues. This prefigured Akademi's decision in the 1970s to align South Asian dance techniques with the British dance sector.

I will undertake an examination of Akademi: South Asian Dance in Britain and the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, two institutions promoting South Asian dance in Britain, to identify that they both have different and distinct visions on South Asian dance forms and how they should 'progress' and develop in Britain. Both institutions were set up in London in the 1970s, with what appeared to be similar aims. Akademi (which was then known as the National Academy of Indian dance) defined its role and responsibilities as advancing 'the education of the public in understanding, appreciation and development of the art of dance generally, and in particular, Indian dance mime and music, both percussive and vocal' (Akademi Declaration of Trust 1979 quoted in Grau 2001). The aim of Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan was to 'bridge barriers between old and new as well as the immigrant and host communities, which is accomplished through the preservation and study of the heritage of India, its art and culture' (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan Mission Statement 1978 quoted in Grau 2001). The Bhavan teachings closely follow those of Mahatma Gandhi and his philosophy.

Twenty-six years later, Akademi has sanskritised its name, but also promotes itself as 'being cutting edge' (see Akademi website 2015). Mira Kaushik, Akademi



Director, wrote in 2000 that she sees it as a 'silent laboratory within which South Asian dancers have experimented and stretched the boundaries of their dance forms within a contemporary social, educational and artistic context' (Publicity Leaflet 2000). Akademi has also embarked upon a series of innovations in South Asian activity: introducing theme-based projects linked to the National Curriculum, confronting contemporary issues through practice which encourages self-empowerment, opening up dialogue between South Asian dance professionals and their western contemporary counterparts, pioneering research into dance training needs. The changing focus of Akademi's work has shown its ability to adapt to changing socio-cultural trends, and even seems to forecast them on occasion. Akademi's productions have included *Coming of Age* (2000) and *Escapade* (2002), which transformed the placid exterior of the South Bank Centre, London, *Waterscapes* (2004) took the splendour of the Mughal Court to the fountain courtyard of Somerset House and *Sapnay-Dreams* (2005) took place in Trafalgar Square bringing together diverse dance styles. These events have demonstrated the public significance that Akademi plays in bringing dance to the communities and foregrounding 'new work' that is relevant to the time and socio-cultural trends. Ken Bartlett (Creative Director of the Foundation for Community Dance and leads the company's artistic policies, and the development of the programmes of work of strategic importance nationally and internationally, particularly those that support intercultural dialogue diversity, health and disabled people) writes that:

Akademi continues to support strong connections to the spirit and roots from which its distinctive contribution to dance in Britain arises, but it has resisted accepting a single definition of dance or South Asian dance; dance artist or South Asian dance artist; community or Asian community and in that lies its strength and its survival (2008: 3).

In this way, Akademi are attempting to separate the South Asian dancer from South Asian dance, and are bringing relevance of the dance form's cultural specificity for the British context.

Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan differs as it continues to emphasise its role of 'educating people in Britain about the Indian community, and helping Indians to put down roots in their new home without sacrificing their heritage' (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan Mission Statement). The Bhavan was originally founded in India in 1938 and there are more than a hundred branches throughout India. The UK Bhavan was the first independent overseas branch and it is also the largest institute for Indian art and culture outside India. It celebrates major Indian festivals (still primarily Hindu), and hosts regular concerts given by resident and visiting Asian artists. Its policy is to programme Indian classical dance and music from India, indeed its mission is 'to train students to be able to uphold the traditions of India and appreciate her rich heritage in art and culture' (see Bhavan website 2015). Bhavan's programmes include performances given by artists of international standing. Nevertheless, the Bhavan is perceived primarily as a community centre and venue, as an ambassador of Indian culture in the UK reflecting a view of Indianness and South Asianness entangled with the politics of the subcontinent. There is thus an underlying tension in Bhavan's relationship with British art funding bodies and with other British South Asian dance organisations. The main aim in its programming continues to be to promote and to preserve the classical forms. On this principle, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan does not host contemporary based work, even when based on traditional

forms. In this way, it is promoting what in its view is an ancient heritage, and largely ignores enquiry by scholars both in the West and in the Indian subcontinent about this antiquity; no link is made to the revivalist and reconstructive movement of Indian classical dance (see Grau 2001).

Akademi, in contrast to Bhavan, has been working on a project by project basis, and seems to 'reinvent' itself every few years. In the early days of the company, Akademi promoted a 'classical highly structured form', and yet currently the 'classical' has been lost from its hegemony and it shares a space with popular culture. Recent projects have incorporated Bhangra and rave, for example, and are promoted to reflect contemporary Asian street dance and music trends, alongside the more classical and traditional master classes that still happen regularly. It can be argued that this has been the case because Akademi are largely publicly funded and so has had to abide by the rules imposed on them (it could also be argued that they have had to adapt in order to survive), whereas Bhavan has been privately funded and thus its supporters have largely agreed with their ideologies.

Whereas Bharata Natyam that is performed in temples and community centres may still have a strong ethnic and religious allegiance, in the mainstream venues such as Sadler's Wells and South Bank Theatre, Contemporary South Asian dance work by artists such as Khoo and Jeyasingh has found a professional status. In order to be a part of the native British public arena, Bharata Natyam has had to undergo massive changes in terms of music, costumes, vocabulary, stagecraft and the themes explored which could fulfil the interests of not only Indian audiences, but also attract

a wider South Asian, British or international audience. Often, importance is given to powerful and sculptured whole body movements, rather than just the intricate hand gestures and facial expressions. Bharata Natyam in the UK does not have one identity, but many, and has a different significance for the diversity of diasporic communities.

For many young British Asians, learning Bharata Natyam is way of 'keeping in touch' with their heritage. As British immigrants from the Indian subcontinent learn and perform Bharata Natyam and Kathak, they are accommodating as well as resisting the dominant British culture. The Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan was probably the first institution to conduct examinations in Bharata Natyam in the UK, but The Imperial Society of the Teachers of Dance (ISTD) has been a recent and high profile addition to offer exams too (examinations were available to students in 2000). The South Asian Dance Faculty at the ISTD was set up in 1999 following a research project by the organisation Akademi: South Asian dance in the UK. The aim was to examine students in two of the most popular classical South Asian dance genres in the UK; Bharata Natyam and Kathak. According to Stacey Prickett (2004: 2), with the backing of an institution South Asian Dance is more easily accepted into a wider culture. By codifying technique and standardising teaching practice, the ISTD works 'alongside a range of cultural institutions which provide a network of support for those working in the South Asian arts communities' (ibid). There has been some opposition from the South Asian community involved in dance to the ISTD. One of the main concerns is the setting of examinations by a fundamentally white organisation when exam systems are already in place by other Indian organisations. Also of contention is the name of the organisation, with the word 'Imperial'

automatically conveying notions of colonial power in India and the relationship is troubled and complex.

Classical Indian dance in Britain also usually fulfils a 'community' function by providing Indian immigrants with a positive sense of belonging. It provides occasions where Indian immigrants can meet together, where a sense of community and identity can be participated in, constructed and affirmed (see Roy 1997). But as Salmon Rushdie and Stuart Hall contest, this rediscovery of home and identity can only be partial (Rushdie 1991: 10; Hall 1990: 224) which is why contemporary artists have developed strategies for creating contemporary work in the British context, as they maybe attempting to reconstruct something imaginary to them. Ya-Ping Chen (2009: 316) argues that the concept of 'Asian modernity' is intrinsically defined by a dynamics of dialectic dualism: national/individual identity quest, colonial/postcolonial power structure, modern/traditional polemics and globalisation/indigenisation impetus. Further, she argues that it is exactly this constant need to be in active interaction with its Western counterpart on the one hand and the incessant internal adjustments in response to historical conditions on the other that make Asian modernity a unique and vibrant phenomenon rather than a branch development of a Western original. It is the constant 'battle' between the strategies and/or necessity of emulating Western models, self-discovery of cultural roots and identity construction through artistic practice that is evident in the work of these British Asian artists, that is even complex as it is situated in the British context.

## British South Asian Case Studies

Whereas for a long time after the start of Astad Deboo's career (1960) in Kathak dance, his innovative work in the 1970s and 80s only got 'lukewarm' reception and success<sup>28</sup>. Ketu Katrak has noted that Deboo worked without recognition, 'except for the hostility of Indian gurus who thought his work looked "Western" and Westerners who found his work "not Indian enough"' (2011: 56). However, the hospitable climate of the 1990s meant that Khan shot to international success. So, tracing a trajectory of dancers over time, Deboo stands out as the elder statesman in innovation, followed by Jeyasingh who created her company in 1988, which has then paved the way for the younger Khan's meteoric rise to fame. Like Deboo though, Khan rooted his signature style in Kathak, and then incorporated a wide range of contemporary dance and other disciplinary vocabularies in sculpture, film and acting; innovations in movement and other genres that Deboo attempted over forty years ago are now regularly hailed in Khan's work. Jeyasingh's work, which fits into the context of the first generation of migrants to Britain, typically desired to 'preserve' their culture and even 'mythologise tradition' (Mitra 2008). However, she was amongst the first choreographers to deconstruct what she has called 'rule-bound dance' and create her own movement vocabulary (Jeyasingh in Katrak 2011). Whereas Jeyasingh has stated that it is desirable that one understands classicism, and then understands how to depart from it, Khoo fits clearly into Chitra Sundaram's category of a South Asian who creates classical work and is attempting to redefine it for the Western context.

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<sup>28</sup> For example, Deboo has said that during this time 'finding work was tough: I said I was a contemporary dancer, but was firmly told: "what does India know of contemporary dance?"' (Deboo in Sawhney 2002).

## **Case Study 1: Shobana Jeyasingh**

In this case study, I will be demonstrating that cultural policies and the legacy of colonial and racist attitudes cause Jeyasingh 'problems' that she has to deal with in order to make work that can be performed in mainstream venues and can be considered 'contemporary'. Whereas choreographers such as Davies and Alston are considered to make contemporary dance work, Jeyasingh has to contend with various issues in order to be accepted in the same way as the aforementioned choreographers. Jeyasingh has produced imaginative, innovative and critically acclaimed work, which she claims, 'has given cultural diversity a unique spin, offering insights into the current and critical agendas of national identity and social integration' (2009) which means that her work 'challenges audiences to rethink their own stereotypes of India, and to move away from the idea of India as rooted in timelessness, unable to change or keep pace with modernity whether in dance or in lifestyle' (Katrak 2011: 76). Her work has undertaken a continual journey and has developed so that it addresses a broad audience, and not only the South Asian community in particular, she has developed from classical tradition, has opened up the vocabulary, developing the movement in space, group work, contact between dancers, concentrating largely on *nritta* (pure dance aspects) (see Jordan 1999). It is my intention here, to examine the artistic choices and processes within Jeyasingh's work to highlight the subversive and resistive potential of her work specifically as an artist who is displaced from her 'home' countries and operating in today's globalised context. She has been able to utilise and negotiate (for her own ends) the concepts of classicism, tradition, modernism and globalisation in order to create a postcolonial account of a diasporic global identity.

## Career and development of work

Jeyasingh has received critical acclaim for her pioneering dance work with Indian and Western dance traditions. Royona Mitra places Jeyasingh's work in the context of British Asian dance by tracing a useful history beginning with the first generation of migrants in Britain, who typically desired to 'preserve' their culture and even 'mythologise tradition' (Mitra 2008). Jeyasingh was born in Madras, India, in 1957. After an itinerant upbringing which included Sri Lanka and Malaysia, she arrived in the UK in 1981 for a Master's degree in Shakespearean studies, after which she began performing as a classical Indian dancer. Trained initially in Bharata Natyam, she grew dissatisfied not just with the traditional touring circuit for Indian dance, but also with its traditional presentation. Many artists of this era focused on the 'authenticity, purity and classicism' (Khan 1997 cited in Prickett 2004: 4), in order to keep the memories of the nation-state alive. The deconstruction of classical forms like Bharata Natyam, odissi or kathak, for instance, was hardly encouraged by dance gurus and critics. For example, whereas Ananya Chatterjea in 2004 was able to write that Chandralekha's<sup>29</sup> debut of *Angika* in 1985 where she deconstructed the 'classical' through Bharata Natyam, kalaripayattu and yoga was 'a piece that altered perceptions of Indian dance inexorably' (2004: 193), it met with extreme reviews that either applauded it as a genius<sup>30</sup> or deployed it as tiresome. Jeyasingh stopped performing and began choreographing and thus, created a signature style that she

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<sup>29</sup> Chandralekha was a controversial Indian dancer whose many productions (including *Angika*) have become the exemplars of modern Indian dance based on her premise of 'the indivisibility of sexuality, sensuality and spirituality' (Massey 2007).

<sup>30</sup> Sumitra Srinivasan wrote that '*Angika* sets the body free...after this, Bharatanatyam need never be the same again' (Srinivasan in Barucha 1995: 168).



describes as 'mak(ing) movement out of lots of disparate elements...That's what I have been doing with dance vocabulary' (SJDC 2013, Company)<sup>31</sup>.

Jeyasingh's experiments with Bharata Natyam began in the mid 1980s, first placing it in unison with the work of Jayachandran, an Indian dancer trained in Western contemporary dance. Steadily increasing her range and scope, she delved into increasing depths, and used the agency of commissioned music by contemporary Western composers like Michael Nyman, to help deconstruct the elaborate and ordered vocabulary of Bharata Natyam. It was in 1989 when Jeyasingh emerged as a founder of her dance company and continues to be regularly funded by ACE. Initially, much of her work focused on the themes of home, borders, maps and journeys. However, this work soon progressed towards signifying 'the products of the new diasporas created by the postcolonial migrations' (Hall 1992: 310); the subjects of hybridity, in which the hybrid is not seen as a compound of separate entities, but new forms that are incompatible with the division which defines them as separate parts (Roy 1997: 81). The foundations of Jeyasingh's investigative work are governed by her belief that dance exemplifies 'a metaphor for the human community at large' (Jeyasingh 2007 cited in Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company 2007a: 2). This symbolic reflection is located in the notion of cultural hybridity: the point at which transformation and translation begin to occur, positioned within the 'third space' (Bhabha 1994: 36). The origins of Jeyasingh's hybrid form are situated in the diverse components and ethnic blends of postmodern Britain (Palmer 2007: 1).

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<sup>31</sup> Jeyasingh also cites her work *Faultline* (2007) which brings together 'a strange, hybrid language – gangsta rap, texting, Hindi' (SJDC Website).

Sanjoy Roy (1997) identifies three distinct phases in Jeyasingh's choreographic career. Her earlier works included *Configurations* (1988), *Correspondences* (1990) and *Palimpsest* (1996). Her initial experiments were with ensemble forms. In *Configurations*, her first dance work which was based on the nritta aspect (Bharata Natyam's formal, non-narrative, pure dance aspect characterised by strong lines and directions, clean outlines and its rhythmically articulate footwork), she experimented with group formations, with what was essentially a solo movement vocabulary<sup>32</sup>. Jeyasingh's dance movements at this stage were largely from the nritta aspect of Bharata Natyam, and although the choreography was questioning and examining the form in these early stages, it remained closely tied to it (Roy 1997). According to Roy (ibid), Jeyasingh's abstract choreography can evoke and suggest meanings, but rarely specifies them. He suggests that by looking at the form of the movement, it may be possible to look beyond the crude dichotomies of East and West or Indian and modern. She has also extended her exploration of Bharata Natyam in terms of structure and in terms of vocabulary, for example, by using the floor (Bharata Natyam utilises an erect standing position and a deep pli   for much of the content, the feet 'stamp' the floor to create intricate rhythms. During the early 1990s, Jeyasingh worked in collaboration with Indian contemporary dancers, and commissioned Chandra to work with her dancers in 1991. They had common ground, in those early years, since Jeyasingh was working exclusively with Bharata Natyam vocabulary: her works 'looked Indian' and were framed as such. Yet in *Making of Maps* (1991) for example, Jeyasingh disrupted the 'formal' contact with the floor and made dancers roll and embrace the floor in a much looser way; physical

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<sup>32</sup> *Configurations* began as a solo, was reworked as a duet, then a trio and finally became a quartet. As with many of her works, the title indicates a physical framework that informs the choreography; the piece shows how a traditionally solo form can be configured into group formations.

contact between dancers (Bharata Natyam is usually performed in a solo format with one body seeming in command of the whole space), whereas in early works such as *Romance....with Footnotes* (1992) she was already beginning to experiment with touch and creating emotional relationships between dancers (and this has continued in her choreographic work), by distorting its iconic poses, by adding everyday movement, or movement from sport, martial arts and yoga. Early choreographic explorations (such as *Making of Maps* and *Romance....with Footnotes*) can be seen as cerebral, because of the formal nature. They used the Bharata Natyam vocabulary significantly, but because of the lack of narrative, the choreography was seen as devoid of emotion and merely a mechanical arrangement of bodies in space. However, Jeyasingh contests that, 'In the best possible world, structure is an emotional experience. But you also need an audience that is empathetic to dance structures' (Jeyasingh in Huttera 2009: 7); as was stated in Chapter 2, audiences need to comprehend social responsibility in concert with the artists.

Jeyasingh has also acknowledged the importance of contemporary music and in particular, her work with Michael Nyman whose music led her 'to think about de-monumentalising the information [of music/rhythm] spatially...that's how the ensemble idea came about' (Jeyasingh in Huttera 2009: 8). When the music comes across as grand, even 'monumental', it influences both the dancers' movements in the stage space and the audience's attention to them and/or the music. Hence, 'de-monumentalising' the music draws attention in a different way to the performers (and audiences) and how they traverse the stage space.

It was in her production of *Making of Maps* (1991) that Jeyasingh moved away from the codified, rigidity of Bharata Natyam into a more personal arena. The piece examines and strives for an elimination and/or softening of boundaries between India and Britain, and 'by placing herself at the centre of the work, Jeyasingh maps out a configuration in which she is not, by virtue of her Indian background, a foreign body adrift in the modern urban world, but an active participant in its construction' (Roy 1997: 77-8). The music too is a collage which constantly suggests a new sense of place and space, and helps to promote the idea of moving from the world in which we live (through the sounds of the city, overheard conversations, snippets of overheard music) to the world we observe (the performance, the sounds of the dancers' feet and the dancers' spoken introductions to the dance). Although Bharata Natyam was still her overriding point of reference, she had now begun to 'mould it to her own concerns'; this was the second phase in her choreographic development (Roy 1997: 6). In the third phase, Bharata Natyam becomes less of the feature point, but more of a resource that she could draw from when she needed to, or wanted to. This phase probably started with the piece *Palimpsest* and although Bharata Natyam was used here, several other movement sources were also used and these included chhau, kalaripayatta and some abhinaya (the dramatic, expressive aspect of Bharata Natyam) as well. One company dancer said that the movement began with Bharata Natyam, extending beyond it and using Indian martial arts forms as well as contemporary 'often unnamed' ways of making movement (Bakht 1997). Jeyasingh's commentaries in the 1990s urged against the use of Indian dance as a representative of Indian culture rather than as its own particular, even objective dance language. She contested tendencies to orientalise and exoticise that have been a part of the history of British Asian dance (see Jeyasingh 1990, for example).

It was during this time that the early 'Indian look' was replaced by a more 'urban look' when Jeyasingh began to focus more keenly on issues around urban imaginaries, youth cultures and globalism experienced differently in transnational cities like London and Bangalore. By the late 1990s, Indian contemporary dancers from Bangalore (recognised as a centre for Contemporary Dance), auditioned to work in Jeyasingh's company, and performed in company productions in the UK. Recent choreography for the company includes *Exit No Exit* (2006), *Flicker* (2005), *Transtep* (2004), *(h)interland* (2002) and *Surface Tension* (2000). This work may have the distinct use of Bharata Natyam hand gestures and footwork, but essentially, she has developed her own movement vocabulary. It is the 'making [of] movement out of lots of disparate elements' that Jeyasingh is fascinated in. In *Faultline* (2007) these 'disparate elements' (Jeyasingh 2007 cited in Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company 2007b) are articulated through the amalgamation of symbolic codes; Bharata Natyam, contemporary dance, ballet, street dance and Capoeira. This composite of techniques/styles is an illustration of how varying entities allow for the 'production of hybrid, syncretic and creolised cultural forms' (Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk 2005: 37), and therefore 'making culture is easier when you are living through difference' (ibid).

Her main motivation over the years of choreographing has been about 'translating the politics of the body in a way that history has made it visible to me' (Jeyasingh in Watt 2005). Like the other artists analysed within this thesis who have come from a colonised country, with a classical dance vocabulary, Jeyasingh found herself in a very 'political situation' and a 'language that seemed to be going in the opposite direction'. She said that there was a 'tension' in using a language that was 'ahistoric' to say something 'historic'. As an Indian-born British immigrant choreographer, she

has motivated her to 'explain the migrant's culture, the politics of the migrant body through dance' (Watt 2004a). As was explained in Chapter 2 the label of 'South Asian' rather than 'Indian' meant that it was 'functional as a funding label to provide new direction and research in the performing arts of South Asia' (Meduri 2008: 224).

### **Key issues and themes**

Jeyasingh's frustrations stem from the stereotypical view of her culture, ethnicity and heritage from critics, funders, audiences and other people and how she is thus prescribed particular ways of working, areas of concern and issues, and the fact that she is seen as an ambassador for a 'fictional' India, an unchanging place 'entrenched in deep spiritual and cultural certainties' (1998: 47). A hybridisation of movement languages and other disciplines is used as a vehicle for exploration across cultures. She is able to explore the contemporary issues and themes that revolve around the East/West and tradition/modernity axes. Natasha Bakht, a dancer in Jeyasingh's company, writes that:

Rather than slotting easily into previously labelled categories of dance, the company's work fits quite comfortably between them...We use Bharata Natyam as our starting point and explore beyond its boundaries to create a vocabulary that is more expressive of our migrant lifestyles...Our intention is to reconcile and perhaps complicate the gap between what is usually portrayed about Indian dancers and what in reality we experience (1997: 9).

Jeyasingh's work challenges the need for 'authenticity' contesting both an Anglo-British fascination with 'ancient tradition' (Jeyasingh 1990) and an Indian immigrant longing for an unchanged homeland (Jeyasingh 1993: 8). Whilst there is debate

amongst ‘traditionalists’ about the parameters of Bharata Natyam and the acceptance of change (see the examples discussed in the beginning of this chapter), Jeyasingh argues that transformation inheres in all forms, including those identified as traditional. As Janet O’Shea writes, ‘Jeyasingh counters the suggestion that her work provides a singular challenge to a static orthodoxy by arguing that her oeuvre interrogates a constructed, not an inherently fixed, tradition’ (2007: 65). At the same time, Jeyasingh does not dismiss the historical and cultural significance of the form, but describes the Bharata Natyam revival not as the rebirth of a vanishing practice, but as a dynamic, self-conscious construction of tradition in the face of colonial criticism (1993: 7-8; 1995: 193).

Jeyasingh is one of the first to question the significance of classicism in her British life and to deconstruct it in practice. Parm Kaur (Date Unknown) articulates the tension that took over Jeyasingh’s artistic vision as she began to rationalise the place for the prescriptive language of Bharata Natyam, and summarises:

It was impossible for Jeyasingh to use her known language of Bharata Natyam, as she was occupying a different physical, social, political and aesthetic space i.e. Britain and her position in Britain as a post-colonial subject, within the context of stylistic changes in contemporary dance scene happening around her, as well as her own fascination for the intellectualism of dance (Kaur Date Unknown, n.p).

Jeyasingh herself states that subsequently her art has come to explore ‘this tension between classical and personal styles, alternating between the precision of Bharata Natyam and more waywardly idiosyncratic movement’ (Jeyasingh in Kothari 2003:

160). When Jeyasingh began reinterpreting Bharata Natyam for her British context, she stripped away the hand gestures (mudras), the facial expressions (mukha abinaya) and the lyrics (sahitya). It is clear that Jeyasingh is passionate about redefining formal movements, questioning the concept of tradition by re-contextualising the contemporary Indian dance for its environment. This re-conceptualisation has seen the creation of challenging, site-specific and multi-media performances. Since the popularity of the work of Khan and other contemporary South Asian dance work, Jeyasingh gets labelled under this same banner and is considered to create similar work, just because they both use a traditional Indian dance language and contemporary dance<sup>33</sup>. However, her choreography probably has more in common with William Forsythe's post-classical aesthetic or Wayne McGregor's densely articulated structures because many of her pieces are also very analytical (as was seen in the analysis of the development of her work above); Jeyasingh, Forsythe and McGregor all require the audience to analyse what they are watching and understand how dancers themselves think, how steps, spaces and musical accompaniment are created. In Jeyasingh's work, the classical Bharata Natyam dance vocabulary is broken down into its basic components; shape, direction and rhythm, before being reassembled, repeated and refracted across the space and amongst the dancers to construct new patterns and dynamics.

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<sup>33</sup> Avanthi Meduri (2011) has argued that although a preliminary conversation on Indian contemporary dance, within the global framework, has begun, there is a need to deepen and extend this dialogue to include academics, artists, critics and producing organisations in order to engage with travel, migration and globalisation as new defining concepts in Indian dance historiography and criticism. This implies that there is a need to consider the subtleties and differences within the category of Indian contemporary dance and how the artists are working creatively and following different trajectories.



Jeyasingh's contemporary sensibility engages provactively with diverse movement vocabularies, so she may display the precision of the Bharata Natyam form, but this may be contrasted with martial arts, more contemporary idiosyncratic dance forms and everyday movement:

It is desirable that one first understand classicism [i.e. classical dance, ballet or Bharata Natyam] and then understand how to depart from it. To break the rules you have to know the rules in a very deep way. Contemporary [dance] need not be a holiday from rigour (Jeyasingh in Katrak 2011: 75).

In the opening of *Making of Maps* (SJDC VHS, 1993), the tension between the clarity of classicism and Jeyasingh's idiosyncrasy of experimentation and modernism is seen. There is a pair of dancers, one dancer takes up a classical pose whilst the other dancer walks around the dancer slowly, as if examining and scrutinising, before slowly pulling the dancer off balance to see what happens and how they move. This concern with aesthetic self-consciousness and awareness of form in the construction of meaning marks her as a modernist<sup>34</sup>. Modernity grants agency<sup>35</sup>, and specifically in the arts where choreography expresses depth through fragmentation, it allows for abstraction from context and a way of creating meaning from within the self. *Surface Tension* (2000) (DVD, 2005) exhibits a postmodern concern with breaking down boundaries between form and meaning, and interrogates the

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<sup>34</sup> This conception of modernism is in keeping with Sally Banes' (1987) conception as she sees modernism as a 'revolution' and progression from one generation to another, reacting against the paradigms of their predecessors and progressing towards a goal of abstraction, rather than John Martin (1933) whose emphasis was on dancers who expressed 'their inner compulsion' (Martin in Coe 1985: 131).

<sup>35</sup> For example, in Fanon's modernist text *Wretched of the Earth* (1961) a 'highly cautious optimism' is evident, and an acute critical agency that accompanied it, and it is this that permeates postcolonial studies in its political and disciplinary field formation. This sense of optimism by postcolonial artists engaging with modernism shows how critical agency functions constantly to undo injustices performed in the name of justice and novelty.

assumption that form can be misleading: an electronic harpsichord contrasts sharply with the busy 'coldness' of the choreography with the dancers performing remotely most of the time; tension is built as the dancers traverse the stage in slow, drawn-out lunges and other long lines and suspending moments of stillness, only making subtle connections between each others' dancing and making little interest in drawing the audience in with the performance quality. Jeyasingh has argued that 'we [postcolonial artists] have always been postmodern, confronting issues of inauthenticity, since we had our own sense of authenticity imposed from a place of power that was Other to us. Deconstruction was a way of life' (2002). Immigrants and migrants continue to negotiate power and hierarchy, with 'universal' ideologies (such as conceptions of modernism, postmodernism and classicism, for example) still dominant. Thus, Jeyasingh and others in her position, engages with postmodernism in order to reject any form of labelling.

Yet it is important to note that Jeyasingh is not solely interested in formal abstract composition, as is demonstrated in the way that she engages and writes about dance in terms of politics. Therefore, although she may have been presenting Bharata Natyam as an objective language removed from its social and historical roots and traditions, especially in the early part of her career, it was a political gesture in that it demonstrated Jeyasingh's desire to be able to participate actively in the British dance mainstream. O'Shea writes that:

Jeyasingh wants to 'level the field' between East and West by creating choreography that highlights the shape and form of movement over emotion and representation. She suggests that Bharata Natyam, like ballet, can be,

and, in fact, has already been, removed from its cultural context many times over (1998: 3).

Jeyasingh retains aesthetic qualities from Bharata Natyam, such as the grounded use of weight and triangular patterns rather than straight lines. However, she deliberately employs particular strategies to not conform to the conventions of traditional Bharata Natyam; in particular the use of facial expressions to portray emotion and characterisation, and/or utilising the gaze to invoke the idea of another imaginary character, the 'coldness' and seriousness with which Jeyasingh's dancers utilise their gaze. All of these strategies disrupt the stereotypical notion of the meaningful content and necessity of narrative in Indian dance. Jeyasingh is able to draw on the 'constructed' tradition of Bharata Natyam without drawing upon historical sources like Sanskrit aesthetic theory manuscripts, classical Mughal poetry or images from Indian temple sculpture and religious practice.

Not only does Jeyasingh's dance work require audiences to rethink and question a demand for an essentialised, unchanging and colonised view of a 'traditional' India, she also requires that all non-Indian communities in Britain recognise the 'Britishness' of her works<sup>36</sup>. The individualism and innovation invoked throughout her work makes no literal reference to a significant moment in the past, and her writings and practice ask us to focus on her creativity. As O'Shea writes: 'In her use of cool formalism, then, Jeyasingh subverts not only old-fashioned orientalism, but also the international stage's demand for a commercialised Indian dance form. She disrupts

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<sup>36</sup> For example, in *Faultline* (2007) Jeyasingh deals with Indian-Asian themes of alienation and disaffection in London's Southall communities and uses a hybrid vocabulary drawn from many dance histories as basis for movement generation in the studio. Further, her staging conventions reference a wide range of influences including opera and film genres.

both the colonial and the transnational gaze' (1998: 6). Jeyasingh does not conform to any glamorised or commercialised version of Bharata Natyam, nor to any pre-colonial or authentic India. Rather than labels, Jeyasingh prefers to focus on the history of the body, but not the 'historical body'; she is interested in 'bodies in the city, and in physicalising the kind of cacophony that cities have [Bangalore is different from London, for instance], to get the body to be multi-nuanced' in her choreography (Jeyasingh in Katrak 2011: 77-8).

Jeyasingh's company has been making work for over twenty years. In that time, the climate for the arts has changed dramatically, with goal-posts continually shifting.

Jeyasingh says that:

I suppose when I started I felt that the arts were very [ideologically] driven because the philosophy that was underpinning the arts was [that] we couldn't hack it in the market and that's the reason [the] arts were funded. Unlike other activities it wasn't something that was ever going to survive in totally [free] market conditions and that's why the government put money in, to subsidise your existence. But slowly that shifted to a feeling that the arts were meant to compete in the market and it had to try and somehow adapt and sell itself like any other commodity (Jeyasingh in Nisbit 2008, n.p).

Jeyasingh articulates the problems of artists having to operate in a 'business' environment. The difficulty is marrying innovation, quality and integrity with models of accountability. This does not mean, however, that Jeyasingh has been afraid to produce works with social comment as their focus, such as *Faultline* (2007) (DVD, 2008) which was about representing the 'lives of restless Asian youth in the UK (as they inspired Gautam Malkani's 2006 novel *Londonstani*)' (SJDC Productions 2013),

and the work centres on the 'identities...concerned...[with] translation' (Hall 1992: 310).

In Jeyasingh's canon of work, spaces have a symbolic meaning, so since *Faultline* opens with the presentation of an empty space, this could be read as depicting the cosmopolitan metropole because it was this environment which would shortly 'invite...interactions of many kinds which...open up possibilities for a shifting kaleidoscope of identities' (Briginshaw 2000: 107). The utilisation of space began with the appearance of two vertical screens; the first of these was shorter in length and clothed in grey muslin, which when lit could be transparent. The second frame was much longer in size and was painted in a grey-like canvas, reflecting a solid and compact barrier. The features of these planes seemed to mirror the relationship between the space and the urban landscape: 'The city has come to be a symbol – maybe even a symptom – of almost every social and cultural process' (Bell and Haddour 2000: 1), as the postmodern city is frequently understood as the means by which recentness and newness is revealed and defined. Thus, the geometric planes combined with the dreary and lifeless affinities with the colour grey unveiled the disparity between the worlds of the cosmopolitan city with that of the subject's complex identity.

*Faultline* was partially choreographed as a result of growing concerns around the topic of British Asian youth and how they are perceived in the West (Jeyasingh 2008 cited in Anonymous 2008: 1). The use of the screens signified that even though these subjects are British, many are still viewed as outsiders: in today's society these

youth are culturally viewed as foreign bodies because of 'how they move, how they look, how they live' (Jeyasingh 2008 cited in Anonymous 2008: 1), and even though today's subjects dwell 'in a world of dissolving boundaries' (Robins 1991 cited in Hall 1992: 307), differences still exist. During the piece, the two screens merged into one, which physically symbolises 'the psychological pain of becoming incorporated into a culture which simultaneously defines him as an outsider' (Roy 1997: 73).

Following the unveiling of the performance space, a black and white film began which saw a pair of British Asian youth, dressed in designer sportswear. Both adolescents were involved in communicating and exchanging street signals such as hand and head gestures, and the act of spitting. These signals illustrated the conventions of 'individual and collective practices of nostalgia and subcultural cool' (Maira 2002: 189). These repetitive codes fused with the black and white footage produced a distressing and threatening effect for the spectator, concerning the identity of these youths. Beginning with a film also provided a 'snapshot' of one of the aspirations for *Faultline*; the influence of subcultures on second generation Asians. Therefore, the audience begins its understanding of the piece from the same starting point, as the film provided an 'effect of making the opening images of the dance less abstract than other work that...[Jeyasingh has] done' (Jeyasingh 2007 cited in Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company 2007a: 2). As the film was shot in black and white as opposed to colour, this reiterated the notion of 'difference'; the 'liminal space' (see Bhabha 1994) was represented through the movements, appearances and the gestures of the urban youth.

The choreography began with three male performers whose movement consisted of twists, turns and jumps. These actions were intertwined with the beckoning of both the hands and head, as well as the dancers pushing their chests forward to convey an attitude of 'come and have a go if you think you're hard enough' (Anderson 2007: 14). These streetwise gestures were intertwined with Bharata Natyam movements such as the *ariamandi* stance (a demi-plié type position) and intricate hand gestures. Jeyasingh insists that although hand gestures from Bharata Natyam are prominent within the work, 'they are not performed with meaning or intention' (SJDC Faultline Resource 2012: 13), but the hand shapes are created in order to give tension to the body, energising the arm and spine (ibid). According to O'Shea (2007), in dramatic sections of Bharata Natyam hand gestures (or *mudras*) are symbolic and have a linguistic meaning. Yet, in this piece, the utilisation of Indian classical hand gestures combined with Western contemporary dance forms and gestures of the streetwise culture indicated the notion of 'the "hybrid" moment of political change' (Bhabha 1988 cited in Young 1995: 23) and thus 'giving rise to new identities' (Hall 1992: 274). As Hall has argued, the idea of a 'fully unified, completed, secure and coherent identity is a fantasy' (Hall 1992: 277) and that identities are continuously evolving for the 'postmodern subject' (ibid) because they are not static and always remain incomplete.

*Faultline* finished with three groups of performers drifting in linear patterns and forms. As the first group of dancers entered the space from the front right wings, they presented their movement and then took a few steps back. This was followed by a second group of dancers, entering from the same wing as the first group. They also performed their movement, as the first group performed a separate sequence behind

them. This was succeeded with the first group of performers leaving the stage. The second group of dancers took a few steps back, as the third group entered from the front wings. This repetitive cycle of activity imitated a sense of bewilderment and also a feeling of danger many subjects of hybridity living within Britain are stranded in a never-ending maze, wandering about aimlessly and confused, not knowing whether to select identities related to Hall's (1992) ideas of 'translation', 'tradition' or whether to continue living in two separate cultures. However, *Faultline* suggests that the subjects have made a conscious decision in accepting their new discourse as the narrative implies what Iain Chambers states of postcolonialism: 'it is impossible to "go home" again' (Chambers 1994: 74). The hybrid's identities must keep on evolving their own rhetoric through the process of 'cultural negotiation and interaction' (ibid), and in this respect Jeyasingh's close exhibited no definitive resolution.

The lack of a conclusion to the piece can also be explained in Scanner's words (composer of the soundscape for the piece). His score illustrated and complemented Jeyasingh's intentions around the concerns of British Asian youth, by creating a 'sense of hovering suspension, trapping voices, textures and harmonies to create tension that never releases' (Scanner 2007 cited in Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company 2007a: 4). The soaring operatic vocals of Indian born soprano Patricia Rosario sang with what appeared to be a seductive and menacing plea 'for the state of British multiculturalism...laced with [a] nascent cultural threat' (Chaudhury 2007: 14).



Given Jeyasingh's interest with examining the symbolic nature of the performance space, it is unsurprising that she has also created a number of site-specific works. Non-essentialist theory, which draws upon Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's (1985) understanding of hegemony, as the process by which identity congeals as apparently fixed, if not natural, and upon Jacques Derrida's (1967) formulation of the relational process, the constitutive outside, by which all identities are inscribed by the 'other' they ostensibly exclude, is deployed here. These ideas, in turn, lead to a conception and understanding of space that, like identity, is never fixed, monolithic, and bound, but is open to interventions when theorised through nonessentialist theory; space is a discursive construction, which is created, reproduced and transformed in and through discourses, defined as socially-constructed 'relational systems of signification' (Torring 2005: 14). The identity of a space, or a meaning of a particular configuration of a space, can only obtain its identity through the articulation of inter-related sets of elements within a discourse and inter-related sets of antagonistic elements can only be partially fixed (see Howarth 2006, Laclau 1990). As Valerie Briginshaw argues, 'The particular ways in which cities and subjects 'mutually define' each other are evident when interactions of dancers with urban landscapes are examined. Bodies and cities can be seen to 'inscribe' each other' (2007: 35-49).

As has been shown above, Jeyasingh was acutely aware of the 'politics of the conventional theatre space' and felt that as a 'diasporic person', a 'marginal person', she wanted to challenge the hierarchical acceptance of the powerful centre stage and was more attracted to using the space near the wings – the 'marginal space' (Watts 2005). Taking her work out of the theatre space enabled her to challenge the

perspective of the spectators whilst pushing the dancers, as well as her own choreographic abilities to the limits (Coldman 2005). Dance and architecture can organise space following a logic of perspectival visualisation, but they can also disrupt this logic by creating 'in-between' spaces. It is this kind of 'in-between', hybrid space which was explored by Jeyasingh in her 1993 work *Duets with Automobiles*, as Valerie Briginshaw (2000) has pointed out in her analysis of its choreography. *Duets with Automobiles* is a choreographical film put together by Jeyasingh and Terry Braun, concerning the relationship of diasporic and hybrid communities with the constructed spaces of London's metropolis. In this composition, a Bharata Natyam dancer places her hand on a window ledge and moves her hand along it whilst the sun sets in the background, implying 'that the dancer is contemplating the future of a new hybrid existence' (Briginshaw 2000: 114).

*Duets with Automobiles* (see Snaith VHS, 1994) is also a piece imbued with a fascination about dance and architecture as forms, hinting at a convergence of their different but parallel, geometrical and mathematical structures, in a thoroughly 'classical' way as far as Bharata Natyam is concerned. This is evident, for example, in a section of the choreography in which one of the dancers performs jathis<sup>37</sup> recited in the manner of mnemonic syllables, framed by the square and circular patterns of the marble floor upon which she is dancing. The three dancers had immobile facial expressions but various pure dance movements were dissected, repeated and performed in different directions in a geometric pattern to emote different sentiments. Contemporary movement is also evident as we see hand-grip contact between the

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<sup>37</sup> Sets of Bharata Natyam steps (adavus) are repeated and combined and accompanied with hand gestures to create jathis.

dancers and floor-based movement. The concern with the way dance relates to architectural structure was also present in Jeyasingh's earlier work, from the time when the choreography included more classical elements and the performance quality was more in keeping with classical Bharata Natyam, as for example in the piece *The Square and the Circle* (1984); in a sense, *Duets with Automobiles* is continuing with this earlier preoccupation. It is a way of choreographing that Jeyasingh has subsequently rejected as being unsatisfactory:

When I go to the theatre I realise I have to engage with the hierarchy of western theatre space, with its own conventions and rhetoric of upstage, downstage, green space, centre stage. There is a very particular power relationship. When you put a body in such a space, you are already telling a story. I find that I am not interested in centre stage any more. Before I choreograph a single movement, just by choosing where I put a dance, I have already made a political choice. The wing spaces, especially that psychologically nebulous place just before entering, is where my interest lies (Jeyasingh in Goldhill 2004: 81).

*Duets with Automobiles* was made for television, and sees the filming of three Bharata Natyam dancers who are juxtaposed with three modern London office buildings. Ironically, the announcer introduces it as 'Classical Indian dance meets the City of London'. Although the internal landscape of the building is a real one (rather than the proscenium arch stage), there is a fantasy aspect to the piece because of the juxtaposition of the dancers and the setting, and the 'playful' treatment of time as night turns to day and vice-versa throughout:

Perhaps one of the most memorable moments in *Duets with Automobiles* in terms of the ways in which choreography reinvests the city spaces with a new kind of power is when the dancer travels forwards towards the camera by the

walls and ceiling of a long corridor, emphasising a new sense of perspective as it recedes into the far distance...The forward approach of the dancers seems relentless; it leaves an impression of female potency and strength that transforms this previously male dominated centre of capital (Briginshaw 2001: 107-8).

This piece demonstrates two key points about Jeyasingh's work, even at this early stage in her career: firstly, the movement content of Bharata Natyam is being used very particularly in the kinds of spatial and temporal configurations that is familiar in Cunningham's contemporary choreography and radically different to classical performances of Bharata Natyam. Secondly, the location in which the film has been shot and those seen through the windows of the building locate the piece in the very centre of London around the (then developing) Canary Wharf area: Jeyasingh is deliberately asserting that her work be viewed in the British contemporary context. In the piece, we see the dancers hugging and caressing the pillars within the building, which suggests metaphorically an affinity for a contemporary urban life. A hybrid Britishness is ensued through the contents, which is also reflected in the musical accompaniment which uses Karnatic singing, but is by a European composer.

### ***(h)interland* (2002)**

Jeyasingh's *(h)interland* at the Greenwich Dance Agency for Dance Umbrella in 2002, went under the label of site-specific multi-media performance event. She has entitled *(h)interland* with a very specific punctuation to indicate a remnant or hint. She thinks of the piece as 'a facility for accessing other things. It says something about the geography between spaces' (Jeyasingh in Hutera 2009). It is a work that deconstructs the representational conventions of theatre, and avoids unified

structure so this piece neatly demonstrates Jeyasingh's strategies for negotiating identity. The piece sees the reversal of the stage and auditorium, so that the audience faces the theatre's exit. Two dancers, Mavin Khoo and Sowmya Gopalan, perform on the makeshift stage are joined by a third virtual dancer, Chitra, who is webcast into the theatre from a hotel rooftop in Bangalore.

Relationships exist, develop and change between the stage, the visual, aural and cerebral elements, as they share each others' space and time. The relationships are complicated as each element has its own distinctive mood, boundary and level of ability to respond simultaneously, which raises questions of control and power. The work engages with Bhabha's definition of modernity, in that it articulates the spatial metaphors of centre and border that relegate the postcolonial artist as non-modern. Jeyasingh explores the border zone as a space of potential power. Reversing the audience and the stage (the audience sits on the stage and the dancers perform in the auditorium) disrupts the colonial gaze; there is no defined centre, edge or place to be unseen:

The idea of the hinterland was about going out beyond the stage, but in one sense the hinterland was also the space that you saw, the stage itself. Bangalore was the other hinterland, but for Chitra we were the hinterland...And for the audience sitting on the stage, there was another sort of play: 'What was the real space? Are we at the centre? And are we watching the wings?' (Jeyasingh in Hale 2002: 43).

The piece sees three types of films; a real time webcast of Chitra on a hotel rooftop in Bangalore, a recorded and manipulated image of Chitra getting on a motorbike,

and the third is a luridly coloured letterbox- format loop of Bangalore traffic. The three films were projected in a triangle, with the webcast on the top, filmed Chitra on stage left, and the letterbox video on the right. The two videos emphasised artificiality with nothing looking really 'natural' and it being once removed from its reference. Then, there was also the contrast between the two films of Chitra: the recorded Chitra, who was completely controlled, and the webcast Chitra live in Bangalore, where you couldn't determine exactly what was going to happen. The webcast from Bangalore confounds any potential expectations of India as an ancient place full of temples, as we see a hotel rooftop designed in a sleek, Conran-influenced modernism<sup>38</sup> that could have been on any continent. The sounds of the Bangalore traffic also added to the effect of being in an urban space. Bangalore is also India's Information Technology capital and is a major centre for providing professional services in finance, engineering and media around the world, which juxtaposes conventional thinking about India as underdeveloped. The strong architectural features of the Greenwich Borough Hall, with its art deco stone is the epitome of English modernism and its sheer size demonstrates architectural allusions to colonial grandeur. Further, the dancing is intermittent, with un-resolved and not fully-formed dance phrases, as if searching and influenced by this space. Judith Mackrell wrote of the piece that there was 'too much disconnected activity' (2002). I contest Mackrell's reading of the piece, arguing that she has missed the subtleties and complexities of the piece, as Jeyasingh wants to disrupt the concepts of time and space as is evidenced through the different 'time zones' and the disruption of the usual use of the stage space and building.

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<sup>38</sup> Designer Terence Conran, provokes an insistence on modernism as the 'correct' mood for today's post-industrial society. The refusal to abide by and engage with fashions ensures the timelessness of his designs and products (see Bayley 2011).

Further, Chitra's dancing on the webcast demonstrates her freedom to execute her movement phrases without musical constraints. The dance language too, is layered with different styles and dynamics, making it complex and unexpected. Dancing in front of a stationary web-camera gives the possibility of completely dominating a visual frame and of forcing reconsideration of a space that we automatically and on first glance defined in a particular way. Although they are the same size, sometimes the dancers are made to appear larger or smaller than their normal proportions. Those moments when the 'real' dancer leaves the 'stage' space, and the filmed dancer appears in her 'stage' space, the question is raised about the freedom of moving in a box like space. If it does not happen in the defined space, it could be argued that it does not happen at all. It then follows that the audience are the ones trapped within the space, sitting in given parameters. Further, the dancing of Chitra on the webcast is not synchronised with the two dancers in the space. The concept of distance seems to be of importance, as it makes for fragmented and sometimes alienating experiences. Again, this modernist approach marks Jeyasingh's work as contemporary and fitting within the 'mainstream' and contemporary dance sector. Jeyasingh's use of the space also questions the classical hierarchies, whereby traditionally in Bharata Natyam solo dancers are centre stage. This conventional use of the space is 'a whole political aesthetic that choreographer and dancer take for granted in all kinds of classical space' (Jeyasingh in Hale 2003: 35).

The piece was commissioned by Dance Umbrella and supported by The Centre for Research into Creation in the Performing Arts (RESCEN). Funding and support also

came from the Arts Council of England. For the argument in this chapter, this has significance as Dance Umbrella's mission statement reads that: 'Dance Umbrella celebrates and champions contemporary dance...the festival presents the best innovative dance featuring the work of the world's leading choreographers as well as exciting young British dance' (Dance Umbrella website 2009). A high profile commission such as this for Dance Umbrella, offered some recognition for the quality of work that Jeyasingh produces, but also that there was an assumption that she would deliver something new and innovative. Further, audiences would immediately expect and read the work as 'contemporary'. RESCEN documented Jeyasingh's creative process during the making of the piece. Two researchers, Hannah Bruce and Niki Pollard, created a journal which documented that Jeyasingh felt at certain points, the process and dance language indicated a very different starting position or 'dance culture', from their own. Pollard has experience of observing contemporary choreographers who work with physical and kinaesthetic experience, organic connections, with internal body imagery and with questioning tasks. Jeyasingh's background means that she views her own process as much more concerned with manipulated, artificial and disjunctive movements (the structured and formal movement content of the classical Bharata Natyam style that she has continuously de- and re-constructed in her work), than with finding organic connections between body and movement or with drawing on internal somatic experience. These examples highlight the problem of looking at British South Asian dance work. Some ways of looking and the Euro-American concepts and methodologies that are employed are not sophisticated enough when reading work which is culturally diverse.



*(h)interland* is a piece that provides us with virtual presences and brings together dancers from different continents in a unique and challenging way. The work explores the secret and bold realities: intrigue is created with the frequent exiting and reappearance of the dancers on different levels or through different doors, which indicates the presence of other hidden parts of the building. The effect is disorientating and unsettling. The audience catch a glimpse of the performers going about their business. The piece and the spectators travel between different lands, whilst simultaneously occupying a given multicultural space. Catherine Hale wrote of the piece that 'the dance was more of a way of articulating the perspectives and proportions of an overall artistic vision than an independent statement' (Hale 2002). Jeyasingh is a dance maker who has experienced migration: her work is inspired by the coexistence (Bhabha's terms) of different personal and historical territories within the make-up of one individual. Jeyasingh's work negotiates between modernism, revised classicism and 'traditional' aesthetics, in ways that make sense in relation to a postcolonial account of the problematic of diasporic global identities.

### **Shobana Jeyasingh: Conclusion**

As a person from a colonised country, with a classical dance vocabulary, Jeyasingh found herself in a very 'political situation' and a 'language that seemed to be going in the opposite direction'. She said that there was a 'tension' in using a language that was 'ahistoric' to say something 'historic'. Being a British Asian has motivated her to 'explain the migrant's culture, the politics of the migrant body through dance' (Jeyasingh in Watt 2004); although most of her choreography might be plotless, it is often shaped by ideas that are in tune with the experience of the metropolitan

migrant and with ideas of crossing boundaries, travelling between centres and margins, displacement and diversity, for example. At the risk of categorising Jeyasingh's approach as a choreographer, she exemplifies a class of 'new cosmopolitans'. These cosmopolitans, in the words of Gita Rajan and Shailja Sharam:

Blur the edges of home and abroad by continuously moving physically, culturally, and socially, and by selectively using globalised forms of travel, communication, languages and technology to position themselves in motion between at least two homes, sometimes even through dual forms of citizenship, but always in multiple ways (2006: 2).

It is clear that the overwhelming desire has been to be accepted as a contemporary choreographer as her strategies and choreographic practice have demonstrated and developed over her career; she has deconstructed the form of Bharata Natyam and utilised its components, negotiating classicism, modernism and postmodernism in the twenty-five years of making work in order to appeal to the broad cross-section of the British audience. Jeyasingh has recognised that there is 'a rather sad fact that dance literacy, kinaesthetic literacy is the least developed of all the literacies from school-going age onwards' (Jeyasingh in Hutera 2009, n.p). So, whilst some critics have judged her formal and abstract choreography as cold, mechanical and distant (see Brown 2005, Mackrell 2005), Jeyasingh feels that this may be due to this lack of dance literacy: 'In the best possible world, structure is an emotional experience. But you also need an audience that is empathetic to dance structures' (ibid). The body has a psychology of movement which provokes an emotional response. Further, as a 'contemporary' choreographer (although she has not always been considered in the same breath as Davies and Alston, for example), Jeyasingh has had to negotiate the

multiple 'tools' available to her, for example, in *(h)interland* whilst we experience dancing bodies on stage in actual time, Jeyasingh was also able to transcend time and space by incorporating 'virtual dancers' in order to bring people together. Throughout the course of Jeyasingh's career, she has been able to problematise the dominant discourse in different ways, going from classical, to modern and postmodern: in the first part of her career, she extended the classical Bharata Natyam technique and movement, putting the dance to contemporary music and incorporating hybrid elements such as martial arts, ballet, modern dance and everyday gestures, then she began to separate dance from the music making formal and abstract compositions which had much in common with Merce Cunningham's work, before experimenting with film, text and technology to 'play' with the notions of time and space, amongst other things. At each stage of her career she has been able to make the classical, modern and postmodern relevant to her own investigations as a British Asian choreographer.

## **Case Study 2: Mavin Khoo**

This case study will analyse the choreographic and performance work of Malaysian-born Khoo and his rearticulation of the Western formulation of classicism. Khoo creates work juxtaposing Bharata Natyam movement vocabulary and ballet technique, and explicitly acknowledges his global position through his understanding of issues of classicism in Bharata Natyam and ballet. By combining both of the aesthetics, Khoo has created a new aesthetic concept that has garnered critical acclaim from the mainstream audience. This new aesthetic concept is based on the quintessential and ineluctable structure of various bodily movements and it rigorously

tries to minimise every intrinsic quality of expression of the face<sup>39</sup>. Khoo draws his new aesthetic idea from Balanchine's notion of classicism which is exceedingly austere as it calls for revealing 'only the bare-bones' of the body to the audience' (Levin 1983). So, whilst Khoo's work might appear at first glance as a step backwards from the work of Jeyasingh, he is a master of Bharata Natyam who is making innovations from within the form as his 'version' of classicism that he is attempting to choreograph, demonstrates a distinct relation to the way that Rukmini Devi Arundale worked to classicise Bharata Natyam in order to support the cultural nationalist project in post-Independence India. Arundale positioned Bharata Natyam 'as an emblem of indigenous self-respect through which India's distinctive cultural attributes and its ancient traditions became manifest' (O'Shea 2007: 16). However, Khoo's relationship with classicism also reflects the way in which George Balanchine reinvented classicism in ballet within the context of American culture; Balanchine was attempting to restore the purity of style in ballet by making the style itself the 'theme' of classical ballet (Denby 1998). Khoo's classicism embodies the theoretical and intellectual engagements of the different dance styles and his position 'in-between' cultures: he adapts the nationalistic classicism of Arundale, highlighting the historical development of the tradition of Bharata Natyam, in order to demonstrate a future for classicism in the British and international context which blurs boundaries between ballet and Bharata Natyam. Thus, Khoo's critical hybridisation of classicism is a strategy to become part of the mainstream and to problematise dominant discourse.

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<sup>39</sup> Bharata, the author of the *Natyashastra* (the first Sanskrit work on dramaturgy) has enumerated various movements of the minor limbs such as movements of the eyeballs (tara bheda), eyebrows (Bhru bheda), eyelids (puta bheda), mouth (asyaja bheda), chin (chibuka bheda) and the cheeks (ganda bheda) but none of these movements were utilised to communicate in contemporary Bharata Natyam. There were quite a large number of commentaries on this text, but all of them were lost, except the *Abhinava Bharata* of Abhinavagupta. The information about them and their authors is in the pages of *Abhinavagupta: An Historical and Philosophical Study* (Pandey 1963).

Aspects of Khoo's personality and cultural heritage are also evident within his pieces; on the one hand, he is very orthodox, Hindu and Indian, and yet, there is a British youthfulness, aspects of his sexuality and understanding of the female psyche (which has come from his understanding and knowledge of female roles within the Bharata Natyam tradition) apparent too (see Thiagarajan 2012). It is these tensions that will be examined in the analysis of his choreographic work, along with the ways in which his work has been used to 'educate' audiences about the 'traditional' Indian form of Bharata Natyam in Britain and abroad (particularly in Malaysia); this has allowed a disruption of normative expectations of both gender and 'tradition'. Due to his use of a classical dance language such as Bharata Natyam, Khoo's work has been marketed and written about in an overdetermined nationalist, Orientalist manner by critics and funders, and this has affected the reading of his work on the international stage.

As has been highlighted previously in the discussion about the development and context of British South Asian dance work, there is a tendency to exoticise the work of South Asian choreographers. Priya Srinivasan has argued that the 'Bharata Natyam dancing body is overdetermined by its heavy layers of eye-catching and exotic paraphernalia that distract the dance critic or researcher from focusing on a "technique" that forever remains inaccessible' (2009: 53). Khoo has been 'exoticised' by critics during his career, and his attempt to foreground and highlight the classicism of the form is partly an attempt to counter this. For example, in 2003 Richard Edmonds wrote that Khoo had 'developed an **exotic** touring programme in

which he combines, in a unique kind of way, facets of Asian dance with classical ballet forms' (Edmonds, 2003, n.p, my emphasis). The writing of critics and the language used in marketing material, demonstrates that there is a different set of criteria used to read and analyse the work of Khoo in comparison to other contemporary choreographers in Britain. Khoo is a 'master' of both ballet and Bharata Natyam, yet mastery of technique is wholly rejected by postmodern attitudes, for example, whilst Judith Mackrell (dance critic for *The Guardian*) has highlighted the beauty of Khoo's solo dancing, she also pointed out in 2001 that his choreography was 'disappointing': 'Khoo is a dancer whose gifts are best seen in contrast with other performers. Reacting against other bodies, other personalities, he is constantly entralling. On his own he is like some precious object – beautiful but static' (Mackrell 2001 n.p). Perhaps the underlying perception is that his 'exoticism' and mastery of technique is displayed next to other performers, with different performance qualities, but also that his display of virtuosity can cause a feeling of impersonality. The choreography of Bharata Natyam usually displays virtuosity and this is often an in-built feature. 'Traditional' Bharata Natyam choreography gives ample scope for polished articulation of the technique at speed (see Jeyasingh 2010), and this is not always favoured by contemporary dance audiences. Khoo has said about virtuosity that:

There are two things to say; the first is that one can't embrace the idea of virtuosity without skill and control. The virtuoso dancer only gives that full energy from which flamboyance comes...people seem to think that virtuosity is purely on a big scale, spatially or physically...people seem to connect virtuosity with male dancers, which is something I have a problem with because I think that they think of virtuosity in terms of muscularity, and masculine muscularity...But I think that virtuosity can actually stem from the point of a dancer who can stand still on stage for three minutes [while

maintaining presence as such] – there is projection and authority there (Khoo in McLorg 2003 n.p).

Khoo is a stunning performer and demonstrates an embodiment of different dance styles. His skills are recognisable in their contrasts and his body cuts across the space, so he never performs 'absence', but is fully present in his different identities, which is due to both his Western ballet and South Asian dance training. His body is taught with muscular tension and his posture is held and upright exuding the classical Indian and ballet training. South Asian dance follows a long tradition that encourages identity and visibility, not an absence of presence:

Bharatanatyam has such a strong technique. My sense is that Western contemporary dance training has various techniques but the emphasis is on training the body to do what the choreographer requires. It is more about a way of moving than a technique. In repertoire, Bharatanatyam improvisation happens within the boundaries of the form. You are taught to smile and use your eyes. You are taught presence (Ramphal 2002).

Khoo's stylised trainings construct and hold his body strictly within the confines of their traditional forms. Khoo exists within the codified techniques; he is totally in his body of languages, each of which leaves its essential, yet performative mark on his body. Khoo fills the space, not with one identifiable style, but with an embodiment of the varying styles.

## Career and development of work

Born in Kuala Lumpur to a Chinese father and Sri Lankan mother, Khoo fell in love with Bharata Natyam dance when he was only five. Khoo was fortunate to grow up in an upper class reputable family that was both politically influential and financially prosperous and despite his parents being academics (his father, Professor Emeritus Khoo Kay Khim is a renowned historian), they recognised how important dancing was to him. Khoo was enrolled at the Temple of Fine Arts (ToFA) under the tutelage of Vasuki Sivanesan at the age of six. From the age of six, his parents wanted him to shine onstage and they paved a path for him. Khoo's parents were disappointed with ToFA because the institution did not take their son seriously and Khoo was never offered the opportunity to perform. Khoo's parents took him to watch one of Ibrahim's most acclaimed dance productions, *Adorations*, and Khoo was then enrolled in Sutra. Within six months of his training, he performed in the production, *Kitatakatarikitathom*, and by the age of eight he had made his name known through this production (see Thiagarajan 2012). The print media covered stories about him, highlighting the fact that his father was Chinese. Aged ten, he left his parents and Malaysia, moving to India to begin his formal induction in Bharata Natyam. On his arrival in India, where he trained under the tutelage of legendary dance maestro Padma Shri Adyar K. Lakshman, Khoo was allowed to practice dance, largely detached from the outside world. His training in ballet began when he was thirteen years old when the British Council initiated the project 'bilingual body'; one child was chosen to be trained in classical ballet at the same time as Bharata Natyam:

The thing is, the 'bilingual' aspect is so deeply inscribed on our bodies already. And the thing is, you can't acknowledge India, for example, without



also acknowledging the colonial side to it – like it or not, we see it through that lens. Same goes for Britain itself: can you truly say there is something purely ‘British’, now that it’s become such a melting pot of cultures? (Khoo in Reljic 2012, n.p).

After gaining a scholarship in New York, where he trained at the Merce Cunningham studios, Khoo also studied in London, and it was in the UK where he started to establish his reputation as a fully-fledged, mature artist. Whilst in the UK, his career saw lucrative commissions including working for the Royal Opera House, the National Youth Dance Company, the South Bank Centre and others. But it also meant that Khoo increasingly got placed into a ‘pigeonhole’, as his culturally varied background often conveniently aligned with a political scenario that would be keen to pander to a ‘multicultural’ outlook:

In London I got the chance to develop a more interesting ‘global’ career, since really, my artistic roots lie somewhere between India and the UK. And the political scenario was also quite interesting when I first started putting up productions there, since the Labour government had just come to power, so the nature of funding had shifted somewhat...my first commission with the Royal Opera House premiered just 10 days after 9/11...so there I was, this ‘kind of Asian’, developing a niche as a British-based Asian dance maker. In a way I was lucky that my aesthetic was in line with the political fashion at the time. As an artist, you need to make the most of every opportunity! (Khoo in Reljic 2012, n.p).

Khoo’s artistic journey has taken him to various geographical locations, enabling him to inhabit multiple ‘home’ or develop ‘multiple attachments’ (Robbins 1998) without losing roots in Malaysia. In India, London and Malaysia, he performs under a different ethnic/national identity. Khoo has pointed out that each identity simultaneously offers advantages and poses hinderances (Khoo in Thiagarajan

2012). Khoo notes that certain experimental works that explore his gay life experiences in London could not be presented in Malaysia which would have likely led to great controversy considering the reputation his family held in the community. Thus, he only stages Bharata Natyam recitals in Malaysia and India. Both before and after forming his company in 2003, Khoo danced with Khan in *No Male Egos* (1999), as a guest artist for the Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company in *Exit, No Exit* (2006), and with other major choreographers such as Wayne McGregor and Christopher Bannerman. He founded his dance company, MavinKhooDance, in 2003 and through the company, he took several productions that he created in London and India on international tours. He presented *Parallel Passions*, followed by *Chandra/Luna* (2004-5), *Devi: The Female Principle* (2006), *Strictly Bharata Natyam* (2006) and a few other solo Bharata Natyam recitals. Khoo has on occasion been 'used' by funding bodies, agencies and venues to 'educate' audiences about the classical dance language of Bharata Natyam, whilst being able to disrupt normative expectations at times. Khoo was associate artist with Akademi (discussed earlier in this chapter); a charitable dance trust which works to encourage excellence in the practice and appreciation of South Asian dance within a contemporary artistic, social and educational context in the UK. If one looks at their reports over a number of years, it is clear that Akademi's aims continue to articulate consistently their desire to position South Asian dance as a part of the mainstream dance sector in the UK. Khoo's placement as a global, South Asian artist has allowed him to remove Bharata Natyam from its Asian context. Khoo's choreography has been informed by its new context, and its placement in sites and locations of British grandeur has meant that audiences are able to see the movement language in a formal manner (as a codified

technique that can be used to exemplify any theme) and visualise its appearance clearly in the multicultural context of London.

### Key issues and themes

Khan's training means that he has a deep understanding of Bharata Natyam which enables him to focus his attention on abhinaya<sup>40</sup>. Although a classicist, Khoo is 'contemporary' in the manner in which he chooses to interpret the text of the poetry, for example, moving beyond the traditional format of gender, that is, he wishes to see Radha as Khoo becoming Radha, and not as necessarily visualised through the words of the poet of an era gone by. He understands that his performance on stage has moved beyond 'mime' (reproducing verbatim what has been taught), to encompass a new world where he chooses to embody what he has absorbed and understood over the years, not only from classroom training, but allowing the different hues of life's experiences to colour his canvas on stage:

Khoo's expression of classicism (as) perfected intensity of bodyline, movement, energy and emotion. It revels in the bare-torso athletic, the androgynous physicality of an intellectual, superbly ballet-trained body; it serves as a vehicle for perfected deconstructed and reassembled *nrtta*, with the traditional virtuosity of speed and complexity magnified by the quick fall-and-recovery of Contemporary dance and the reaching energy and spatial leaps of ballet that dazzle his audience and often outshine his own intensely emotional *abhinaya* (Sundaram 2002).

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<sup>40</sup> *Abhinaya* means to carry the performance towards the audience. Although dance scholars through the ages have attempted to analyse the meanings of the term, they have reached no definitive consensus on its proper significance. However, it is generally accepted that in Bharata Natyam, there are four types of abhinaya: *Angika*, comprising bodily movement; *Vachika*, referring to the speeches and song by the actor; *Aharya*, consisting of facial make-up, costumes, jewellery and settings; and *Satvika*, the expressions of psychic states intimately associated with emotional conditions (see Coomaraswamy and Duggirala 1970).

Khoo has stated that 'East and West are like two overcoats worn together. My identity in classicism [whether classical Bharata Natyam or classical ballet] can place itself in any cultural canvas' (Khoo in Katrak 2011: 203). What excites Khoo is the 'power of classicism' to create a kind of emotional power or *rasa* that moves audiences, whether through abhinaya's hand gestures or through ballet and modern dance's abstract movements. Khoo noted that 'there is a natural stylisation in India where hands convey narrative' even in daily life, but he continues, his body and mind 'are not Indian, but hybrid. To play Sita, or Juliet, require the same tapping into the power of classicism with its clarity of lines, the geometry in invisible lines and the in-between' (ibid).

Khoo has written that 'the important thing is that, in order to find the "oneness" of ballet and Bharata Natyam, I actually had to live two separate lives for a long time before I could find them within each other' (Khoo in McLorg 2003, n.p). His choreographic work has been a 'product' of the training that he has received and understanding of these classical dance forms, but because of Indian dance's association with 'tradition' and authenticity, there has been difficulty in finding a place within the 'mainstream' British dance world, or at least an acceptance of his work as 'deserving' and equal to other canonical ballet technique work due to its relationship with classicism<sup>41</sup>. Khoo has remarked that what excites him is 'the power of classicism' to create a kind of emotional power of *rasa* that moves audiences, whether through abhinaya's hand gestures or through ballet and modern dance's abstract movement (Khoo in Katrak 2011: 203).

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<sup>41</sup> As explained in the Introduction, the term 'contemporary' has the advantage of suggesting that a dancer has the freedom to experiment with 'tradition' or 'classical' dance and modern dance in the West has its own history of rejecting the rigid classicism of Ballet.

Noting Khoo's repertoire of work, it is easy to recognise the 'power of classicism to which Khoo refers, for example, *Images of the Varnam* (2001) was a work created for himself and two dancers from the Royal Ballet. He focused on the mastery of the filigree detail of the pure form of Bharata Natyam (nritta) juxtaposed with the stretchy symmetry of classical ballet and created a blunt physicality of the form possessed with muscular power and sheer athleticism. Khoo's opening solo displays him as a kind of male temple dancer, but in subsequent duets he becomes both object and agent of unsettlingly ruthless desires. The varnam is a South Indian musical component being central to the Bharata Natyam repertory. *Lunar* (2004), inspired by Indian and European notions of the Moon and its influence on human life, combines the austerity of the form in ballet and Bharata Natyam. By juxtaposing excruciatingly fast based 'tirmanams' of Bharata Natyam with ethereal lightness in his leaps<sup>42</sup>, extensions, fluidity of movements from the classical vocabulary of ballet, and by covering his face with a white mask Khoo once again accentuated his aesthetics of the physical form (musculature of the body) in his contemporary Bharata Natyam. Another striking example of brusque physicality is seen in the prologue of *Parallel Passions* where Khoo starts by slapping the floor with *tatta adavus* of Bharata Natyam which is juxtaposed with the pointe work of Alex Newton and thus, 'is in part a simple reflection of his own history' (Roy 2003). In the evening performance, this is followed with *Gemini* in which a 'non-identical stylistic twinship' between Ballet and Bharata Natyam continues shedding light on geometrical lines and technical prowess (Roy 2004: 13), with phrases working up to a position, sometimes ballet, sometimes Bharata Natyam.

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<sup>42</sup> This concept of ethereal lightness in leaps was adopted by Khoo (2003) based on Balanchine's notion of a perched flight (see Balanchine's formalism written by David Michael Levin 1983: 35).

Alessandra Lopez y Royo (2004), however, has argued that artists like Khoo are attempting to make the Euro-American concepts of classicism more accommodating, flexible and more relevant to the diasporic context. Royo continues that this attempt has not been accompanied by a ruthless critique of the underlying assumptions of hegemonic notions of classicism: 'difference' needs to be introduced more forcefully as a term of the discourse. She further argues that, shaped and sustained by difference, 'other' aesthetics are transformed into a discourse of dissent and subversion through which, by creating contemporary artistic practices that are political, the performative can have an impact on real social space. Whilst I agree with Royo's observations here, it is my contention that Khoo has been attempting to highlight 'other' classicisms, specifically that of Bharata Natyam. An example is when Khoo teaches a workshop starting with classical ballet steps, before making the participants use Bharata Natyam adavus, they are taken on a journey from ballet to Bharata Natyam. What becomes evident is a process of transition and negotiation taking place. Through 'postcolonial mimicry' (Bhabha 1993: 85-92) Khoo affirms the classicism of Bharata Natyam (and classicism has been assumed as only applicable to ballet); by 'copying' the classicism of ballet, what emerges is the tension between the control of the overarching ideology of classicism and the natural progress of history and how Bharata Natyam has classicised.

Khoo has been able to reinterpret the classical dance language of Bharata Natyam by critically reflecting on its history. Mark Franko (1993) has proposed that the process of reinterpretation is about extracting the theoretical principles of a period in

order to experiment with them. Research by Avanthi Meduri (2005) suggests that Rukmini Devi Arundale's approach should be understood less as one of reconstruction and more as a modernist project. Vena Ramphal has also argued that 'while Bharata Natyam is so fond of Devi's rebellion it would do well to take more direct inspiration from it' (2003: 33). Khoo has used Rukmini Devi Arundale's inquiry as the inspiration for his investigation of creative intersections between Bharata Natyam and ballet (see Katrak 2011). Thus, his work emphasises classicism in general. Khoo's aesthetic concept too, is based on the ineluctable structure of various bodily movements and it rigorously tries to minimise every intrinsic quality of expression of the face<sup>43</sup>. Khoo draws his new aesthetic idea from Balanchine's notion of classicism which exceedingly austere as it calls for revealing 'only the bare-bones' of the body to the audience (Levin 1983).

Khoo has also been able to make some comment of the development of Bharata Natyam within a patriarchal society in his choreography and performance work as his work examines notions of androgyny constructed within the framework of classicism, which appears to hold unwritten rules about the placing of the male dancer within specified gendered stereotypes. In 2006 MavinKhooDance launched the Podium project which was a monthly club night that took ballet into the precincts of London's most established clubs. The company developed a range of works that were specifically designed for corporate/club events. The project highlights Khoo's contradiction as a London based artist: the orthodox formality of the classical purist

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<sup>43</sup> Just as when Jeyasingh began to make work in the British context, she stripped away hand gestures, facial expressions and lyrics, Khoo is also stripping away the associations of the 'traditional' Indian dance form. He does this in order that the performance is not just as artistic representative of 'Indianness', but a serious artistic product contributing to a larger framework of theatre dance within a culturally diverse society.

with the materialist London of clubs, dance studios and postmodernist freedom to experiment. The performance work produced meant that the dancers were going into clubs and partially improvising to the type of popular music usually played in the club and participating fully in this context. The physicality and muscularity of the classically trained ballet dancers who performed on pointe worked well in this environment (especially as they wore very tight fitting leotards and/or shorts), in that when they truly 'let go' they appeared erotic and could perform sexually charged movement content. It was highlighted previously that classical dance is highly stylised and heightened, however, there is some attempt to locate a 'natural' dancing body through this project<sup>44</sup>. It is through the rejection of divinity and mythology and embracing the British context of clubbing and popular culture, that the dancing body is resituated from its historic and cultural framework.

Khoo is also specifically interested in the representation of the female on stage, performing at times in tutus and pointe shoes when in ballet mode, and in classical Indian style, for example, investigating *Devi: the female principle*. He speaks of dance performance as being 'not gender specific' (Khoo in David 2010), and is often described by critics as having an androgynous quality in his movements. Khoo often performs bare-chested (as is traditional for male Bharata Natyam dancers), and his appearance, with no chest hair gives a smoother, finer and more androgynous look. Ann David has written that in Khoo's performances there is a 'complex layering of

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<sup>44</sup> Dancers' bodies (especially female dancers' bodies) have been historically overdetermined by prevailing social assumptions about just what kinds of bodies constitute a dancer's body, but modern dance (for example, Isadora Duncan) brought about the rhetoric of the 'natural body' (see Friedler & Glazer 2014). Ann Daly has classified five different, but interrelated bodily practices: 'the dancing body, the natural body, the expressive body, the female body, and the body politic' (1995: 19). These bodies are not discrete or linear and there is continual overlap between them.



performativity, producing several modalities of a dancing body' (2010: 3); there is the dancing body that is trained in classicism, there is the dancing body that becomes the deity, or who becomes a female or male character from mythology or who becomes as a female ballet dancer, and thirdly, there is the dancing body of Khoo himself, expressing 'ambiguous desire', the need to be loved and to transcend the mundane. Embedded in these dance forms are distinct historical, cultural, religious, sexual and political layers and representation that produce different sets of relations and negotiations of power. Judith Mackrell drew attention to the fact that Khoo's 'style is almost that of a woman dancer and in performance he plays with these feminine qualities' (Mackrell 1999), showing how Khoo constructs a dancing body in performance that can play with notions of gender. Khoo speaks of how playing predominantly female roles from a young age, learning the characters and taking on what he assumed to be the thoughts of women has affected not only his dancing, but his relationships in later life (see Khoo in Pegler 2001, n.p).

Khoo saw the characters portrayed in his dances as ones that would seep into the dancer's consciousness, enabling a blurring of the boundaries between performer and performed. This enables an easy reversal of gender roles, found overtly in the history of *bhakti* (devotional) worship in India, where male devotees of Krishna may worship as females (Young 1987), and Tamil men may encompass a certain 'femaleness' whilst possessed (Kapadia 2000: 183), as *bhakti* devotion allows for different kinds of relationships with God. Performance of *bhakti* through danced story items, or the representation of mythological characters is an integral part of Indian classical dance, and a dancer may be depicting male or female roles, unrelated to their own gender. This view sees the embodied human self as a permeable, even

porous entity, available for the gods and spirits to enter on demand or spontaneously, and for gender roles to be fluid and malleable. However, this is quite different to Western approaches that value the 'normalcy of an inviolable and unitary self' (Smith 2006: 44). If the notion of Orientalism is applied here, with its extended history indicating a more sympathetic notion of interest in the East, as historian John Mackenzie describes, of a 'scholarly admiration for diverse and exotic cultures' (Mackenzie 1995: xii) and a move, in earlier times, to gain inspiration from Eastern encounters, to encourage a cross-fertilisation of ideas, and to extend the range of language in music, art and dance. The influence of the Orient had a profound effect on Western cultural expression, and it is known that within Orientalist thought, there was a complexity of Western approaches to the East that was not a simplified, monolithic understanding of domination and hegemony. Artistic promiscuity is often a feature in the growth of cultural expression, running as a counteractive force to those wishing to preserve and protect 'tradition'. The seeing of links and gaining of inspiration from old myths, from other European traditions, is well documented in artistic history and the East or the Orient was just another area for fertile borrowing. It follows then, that during the past seventy years or so, changes have become apparent which allows a dancer, like Khoo, to explore the gender and be freed from the confines of stereotypical gendering. The gaze remains a complex arena for analysis, retaining elements of ambiguous desire and appreciation in the face of aesthetically pleasing dancing bodies, but no longer appears to contain aspects of residual orientalism.

### ***Devi: The Female Principle (2006) and Devi: In Absolution (2008)***

A closer analysis of *Devi: The Female Principle* (2006) and *Devi: In Absolution* (2008) (for an excerpt from this piece see Mavin Khoo: *Devi*, 2008b) will be undertaken in order to demonstrate that Khoo's deployment of classicism is a strategy in order to problematise dominant discourse and subvert normative ideologies of what can be considered 'classical' in the mainstream dance sector and how he troubles issues surrounding gender: *Devi: The Female Principle* most clearly highlights Khoo's relationship and exploration of classicism. Khoo's fascination with the goddess Devi as a child grew into an infatuation, eventually leading to the creation of the piece with French choreographer Laurent Cavanna for Venice Biennale in 2006. After the success of the neo-classical ballet production, he investigated the subject matter deeper by turning towards literary works and scholars in Chennai (see Thiagarajan 2012). The result of the research is *Devi: In Absolution* which was performed in Malaysia predominantly (and perhaps this is the reason why there were more 'classical' Bharata Natyam elements). In this solo Bharata Natyam recital, Khoo brings to the fore the three manifestations of Devi: Meenakshi (the child goddess), Durga (the warrior) and Kali (the destroyer).

*Devi* is a fifty minute dance duet performed by Khoo and Cavanna; the multilayered performance and combines the use of a female Indian vocalist, Pushkala Gopal, and a countertenor, Michael Harper. In Hinduism, the Goddess Absolute is personified as Devi, the counter balance to the male principle. The work explores six parts of the female physique (hair, breast, waist, womb, hips and feet) as its choreographic stimulus for a series of virtuoso duets and solos (as was highlighted earlier virtuosic

displays are integral to Indian notions of classicism and yet, postmodern attitudes about dance as evidenced in the development of post-Judson dance training have challenged and transformed the traditional notions of virtuosity as they had seemed to reject this by using everyday movement). Using text from the ancient Hindu work *Soundarya Lahari* (believed to have been written by sage Pushpadanta and Adi Shankara) and poetry from Islamic Sufi compositions, the piece is choreographed to a time line provided by musical composer Jennifer McConnaught<sup>45</sup>. Devi is synonymous with Shakti, the female aspect of the divine, as conceptualised by the tradition of goddess worship. She is the female counterpart without whom the male aspect, which represents consciousness or discrimination, remains void. Though the movement content at times can be linked to goddess images in the Hindu tradition, it remains difficult to read the sequences in religious terms, or as the deification of women. Khoo and Cavanna explore these three manifestations by providing a theatrical compositional landscape within the Bharata Natyam genre, the towering countertenor uttering 'female sounds' and the use of identical 'female' costumes for the two dancers, helped to promote the ideas. Set against fragments of film installation, the work is as much a celebration of divine female absolution as it is an all-pervading force of innocence, love, energy and destruction.

Khoo received mixed reactions from the arts public regarding his use of explicit imagery in *Devi*:

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<sup>45</sup> It has been noted that the use of Hindu texts as stimulus for a piece of dance may alienate areas of British audiences, due to them not being able to identify with the religious connotations and it was highlighted in an article asking 'Why do [South Asian] dancers talk so much?' that perhaps it is because South Asian dance has a 'deep and formal relationship' to text, creating a 'speaking tradition', in which dancers nowadays are trained to introduce their pieces, from memory, on stage (Lopex y Royo 2005: 9) which is what Khoo has had to do when this piece has been performed in theatres several times.

The image of me dancing with my bare back is interesting. It received good reviews from London, but mixed in the Midlands...one should not shy away from exploring. I enjoy dancing and performing in front of diverse audiences and there are many young creatives out there who come to my shows which furthermore interesting (Khoo in Kailey 2006, n.p).

The reference to Devi in the title also draws attention to another meaning of the word 'devi', the label given to the upper class and upper caste women who had a prominent role in the revival of Bharata Natyam. In the politically charged period summoning the 1930 and 1947 legislative acts, the revivalists worked to return the dance form back to its 'pre-prostitution' glory, their restoration became a project of redefinition, reconstitution and re-population (see O'Shea 2007). The revivalists, led by female pioneers like Rukmini Devi Arundale, were motivated by the desire to give value to the form in India and recognisable international status to the dance; these pioneering revivalists did this by making it classical (see Coorlawala 1992, Meduri 1996). Though the devi's classicism matched that of the West, it was distinct from it: its terms of reference were Indian. Whilst Khoo is drawing on the classicism of both ballet and Bharata Natyam in *Devi*, as was highlighted in my interrogation of classicism in Chapter 1, it is more difficult for white Western viewers without relevant knowledge to recognise the Indian classicism within the piece as something 'other'; the internal dynamics are automatically assumed to be those of classicism as defined and understood in the West.

*Devi: The Female Principle* was reworked into *Devi: In Absolution* when Khoo returned to Malaysia, and was performed in aid of Pusaka, a non-profit organisation

established by Khoo's brother, Eddin Khoo, to conduct research and create comprehensive documentary archive of traditional performance in Malaysia. Fundamentally, this piece was 'traditional' and classical in content, but 'contemporary' in context. Traditionally, Bharata Natyam work based on a theme becomes very literal: dance drama. This work was an attempt to abstract the ideas about female energy. Khoo said in an interview with Ann Marie Chandy that 'what's interesting is that Malaysian audiences have always seen my traditional repertoire...very much in a traditional context' (Khoo in Chandy 2008, n.p). He explained that although the show has a very specific theme and is based on literature, he has tried to make it as abstract as possible.

The piece opened with a film: Khoo is in a foetal position, then on all fours. It was symbolic of a child being born of mother Devi. An eerie figure of a woman in a red sari appears to shadow Khoo. Traditionally in Bharata Natyam, the representation of Devi should be kept symbolic because the mystery and awe one feels towards a Goddess is immediately lost in the appearance of an imperfect human form (see Avatar 1984). The film was used effectively to enable abstraction, as Khoo was 'touched' by a woman's finger on film sliding down Khoo's back on stage, so that his reaction towards this virtual touch was performed live. Khoo then stands with his back facing the white screen. Just standing with a slight twitch of facial expression reacting to the woman's touch was performed with real virtuosity.

In this first section about Meenaskshi (the child and the bride), Khoo chose to perform the basic stances and movements of Bharata Natyam, which is repeated at

increasing speed and is performed in a light-hearted and playful manner<sup>46</sup>. His palms, which are painted red, were used to draw circles in the air. He depicted the image of a curious child, his hands always forming and feeling various 'shapes'. In the next scene, the 'child' shows off his dancing skills in a series of complex footwork. He explores in isolation, treating his right leg and foot like a creature separate from his body.

The tone of the performance shifted after this first section and Khoo incorporated virtuosic rhythmic patterns and movement sequences to evoke the forms, Durga and Kali. There is a contrast between the love and innocence that was evident in the first half, and the energy that is now evident which insinuates power and domination. This is manifested through the use of space as he moved extensively around the stage through fast, squatting jumps, which turn into double/triple pirouettes and high leaps, creating a robust warrior image. The mood built in intensity as he dances with violent fury. Transforming into an empowered and fierce Kali, he repeatedly stomped the floor with his feet. With his mudras, he slashed and destroyed everything that came into his way. The image of blood dropped in the film shown above him depicts bloodshed as a repercussion of such destructive force. Simultaneously, sindoor (red powder) literally poured down on Khoo who danced on the stage. During the scene, the stage lights are dimmed with only a spotlight on the dancer. It culminated with a climax in which the intensity of singing, chanting and dancing built on without reaching a proper conclusion.

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<sup>46</sup> This longer section consists of the *adavus* (basic movement phrases) of Bharata Natyam, which is performed with variations of speed, order and directions. This Meenakshi section however, is not performed in the traditional manner (with facial expressions) and does not specifically interpret lines of text sung to music which means that it is 'simpler' and more accessible for those not completely versed in the traditions of a Bharata Natyam performance.

The work, which he described as a personal journey and is demonstrated through his introduction to the piece where he speaks pensively about the ideas behind his choreography, provided ample scope to explore liminal spaces through improvisational movements. Khoo's body is given much prominence in this work, through the 'touch' in the film, lingering over certain iconographic poses of the goddess, and the spotlight on his body covered with sindoor and swear. Even though the production is sculpted based on Indian texts about Hindu goddesses, there is a presence of 'male-narcissism', in the form of 'self-absorption' (Chow 2009: 109) of the solo male dancer. Khoo's own narcissistic self-absorption manifests through his obsessive concern of his body and appearance as well as his identification with the object of desire, Devi. His extreme self-absorption suggests that Khoo is not just dancing the goddess, but he is the embodiment of the goddess. There is also a potential risk in this presentation. The incorporation of his improvisational self expression to the divine presentation, while emphasising his artistic maturity, denies audiences the potential to read or appreciate certain abstract ideas of his work. At the end of *Devi: The Female Principle*, Khoo and the female dancer (Cavanna) collapsed on the floor and there was a moment when their eyes met and they took time to look at each other, which evoked a sense of emotional connection between the two dancers (or as Katrak has described as 'rasa'), providing the audience with a thoughtful emotion which both elevates the spirit and engages the mind in recognising that the coming together of these two differently classically trained bodies contributes to the idea that classicism is a concept that needs redefining.



*Devi: In Absolution* brought together two popular world-class artists on one stage: the vocalist, O. S. Arun, and obviously, Khoo, which was a primary selling point for the production. Khoo has said about the collaboration that:

I feel that I have the freedom to go anywhere and he will be there to support me. I think he feels the same about me. What's nice is that this was initially instinctive but now the more we perform together, the more we develop this skill. I would say that about 80% of our performance is based on improvisation and that's very liberating (Khoo in staronline n.p).

It has been noted that improvisation is not as easy for South Asian dancers trained in Bharata Natyam as it is for those trained in Western dance (see Katrak 2011), but improvisation allows for a 'new language' to develop and an honest response of the movement of Bharata Natyam, ballet and the contemporary sensibilities that he has from working in the global context.

### **Mavin Khoo: Conclusion**

Khoo's choreographic work has not always seemed 'fully developed' for Western audiences on the evidence of newspaper criticism. For example, in 2001 Judith Mackrell wrote that:

*Images in Varnem* has been an experiment both for the Royal Ballet (one of whose dancers appears in its Asian/western choreography) and for Khoo himself, who has rarely created work on such a large scale. It has certainly been the Back Garden's most interesting hybrid to date...Khoo, who has so much less experience as a group choreographer than as a soloist, possibly doesn't yet know how to make ensemble work for him. Credit should go to the

Back Garden Project for giving him the chance to try, and for showing us that Khoo is much more than an exotic one-man show (Mackrell 2001, n.p).

Khoo has been able to make work in the British context, but in doing so has made some choices that reflect his ability to see opportunities within both the classical and contemporary dance sectors. In 2005, Khoo worked with thirty dancers, twenty collaborators and London's Trafalgar Square in a Ballet DTPM Production called *Giselle* (the reinterpretation of the famous romantic duet from this production showing Khoo dancing on pointe with a partner to electro music is available to view online; Khoo, 2008). Some of the best dancers from the Royal Ballet Company worked alongside reputed DJs. Ballet partnered with contemporary club culture before a crowd of 2,500. The gratifying consequence of this was an 'interesting crossover of audiences'. Khoo explained that the 'Royal Opera House (at which the Royal Ballet Company is based) noted a significant forty-one per cent increase in new audiences and DPTM events suddenly had ballet lovers queuing outside to watch' (Khoo in Gowri 2008, n.p).

Clearly, there are 'advantages' of a classical dance language; its strength and power are amongst its qualities, but also is an objective technique that particular bodies can fit into. However, this has not always been the case with the South Asian classical dance forms. Khoo draws attention to the fact that dance forms do not evolve in isolation, and his commentary is embedded in the history and context of Bharata Natyam (and ballet to an extent). He has used classicism in a political sense, although as has been evident from the way in which Khoo's work has been used to 'educate' audiences, it is not necessarily read as such. Khoo has proved throughout

his career to date that he is willing to educate and challenge his audiences with the classicism of Bharata Natyam. It is too, a process of 'postcolonial mimicry' as he attempts to give Bharata Natyam the status of classical ballet. He emphasises the classicism of Bharata Natyam to 'stretch' the definition of the Euro-American classicism. However, Khoo has been unable to fully critique the underlying assumptions of the classicist discourse throughout his choreographic and performance work as he has utilised the 'tools' and ideologies of Rukmini Devi Arundale as a starting point<sup>47</sup>. Questioning and critique of the nationalist project that Devi was part of has not fully been undertaken by Khoo. Therefore, the reading of his work has generally been seen as 'traditional' and linked to a specific 'Indianness'.

Ethnicity, class, family circumstance and global network have all helped to construct Khoo's cosmopolitan 'star' image. David Morgan (2004), in *Class and Masculinity* argues that when we move beyond a binary model of class, which commonly focuses on working and middle class, a range of possibilities become available to us. For instance, Morgan suggests that 'class as experience' could be filtered through educational experience. Education abroad and diverse dance training create upward class mobility for dance artists such as Khoo, through enhanced communication, public relations and creative artistic skills. It meant that Khoo was able to intellectualise his productions and cultivate professionalism. However, Khoo's 'star' status renders him more vulnerable to surveillance which makes his gendered body even more 'policed' by regimes such as state, cultural institutions, family and audiences. He has explored gender in quite a subtle manner at times by using

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<sup>47</sup> Avanthi Meduri (2005: 238) has stated that in personal correspondence with Khoo that he has stated that he has used a rethinking of the revival of Bharata Natyam, and specifically of Rukmini Devi's investigation into ballet and Bharata Natyam to further his choreographic inquiry into the two classical forms.

Bharata Natyam, rather than contemporary dance. For example, Khoo's embodiment of the women as an object of desire and flirtation with femininity (in productions such as *Dev*) illuminate patriarchal privilege.

### **Case Study 3: Akram Khan**

The Akram Khan Company is 'one of the foremost innovative dance companies...Embracing an artistic principal that both respects and challenges tradition and modernity, the company has become renowned for its intercultural, interdisciplinary collaborations' (Programme Notes 2010) and a company which 'journeys across boundaries to create uncompromising artistic narratives' (Akram Khan Company website 2011). It is my intention to analyse the way in which Khan has been able to embrace postmodernity and multinationalism to occupy an 'in-between' space where he is able to comment on the personal and political in order to highlight the dynamism of his diasporic identity. Refusing to create a formula with which to work with Kathak and contemporary dance and instead embracing 'confusion', Khan has been able to comment on Western performance aesthetics and Indian tradition-bound expression. Further, in his intercultural and interdisciplinary collaborations Khan has been challenging conventional ideas of 'traditional' dance forms and embracing the idea of rupture. Scholar Royona Mitra has analysed Khan's

Explorations in performance (that) provide a set of conscious, intellectual and corporeal dialogues between classical Kathak, contemporary dance, facets of European dance-theatre, and a series of artistic disciplines creating an intertextual creative landscape. However, at the heart of Khan's practice lies

not a formalist approach, but rather one driven by content that examines the nuances in diasporic life (Mitra 2008).

It is this, Mitra contests that sets Khan apart from his British Asian colleagues (such as Sonia Sabri, Anusha Subrahmanyam and Parbati Chaudhury); Khan offers an insight into the global crisis and other life experiences of a British Asian dancer. His work deliberately probes the issue of identity and he attempts to disrupt his own embodied knowledge. It is this questioning and subversion of the norm, his exploration of identity and ability to work within the global context which will be focused on within this case study. The piece, *zero degrees* (2005), has been chosen for analysis within this case study because of the way that Khan demonstrates his 'in-betweenness' and volatility of identity, his exchange of movement and information with Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and the politically postmodern nature of the piece.

Khan does not like his work to be labelled and continually tries to dodge categorisation in the attempt to create something that can be included in the British mainstream dance discourse. However, Katrak reads this differently arguing that his art clearly represents the attitude of his confident second generation, expressed in a statement like 'It's what I do that matters, not where I'm from' (Khan in Katrak 2011: 207). It was highlighted in the introduction that there is a discourse in Britain where written text and conversations strive to establish genealogy based on racial, cultural and political difference and there is a constant struggle for artists such as Khan to make work that is beyond ethnic identity<sup>48</sup>. This is especially difficult for Khan whose

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<sup>48</sup> The discussion on identity politics in the introduction drew on Sonia Kruks' (2001) argument about how the politics of difference has appropriated the language of authenticity to describe ways of living that are true to the identities of marginalised social groups.

grace and onstage presence often encourages audience members to reference him and his dancers' genetic and cultural makeup before experiencing and contemplating the dance work. Khan's dance work has become part of the school curriculum in Britain today, which on the one hand is a significant recognition, whilst others may criticise this perceived 'mainstreaming' of his work<sup>49</sup>. Khan's work has such wide appeal since he enables audiences to 'imagine common elements', notes Ramsay Burt, 'that are sufficiently central to people's experiences of globalisation in multicultural Western countries to permit an appreciation of difference' (Burt 2004a). It is because of this, that Khan contributes to the 'richness and diversity of contemporary British culture' (ibid). Katrak has argued that 'such inclusion marks a very positive step in transforming mainstream perceptions of South Asians and placing them integrally as belonging to Britain's diverse society, and all this despite the uphill battle that continues to exist for many ethnic artists' (2011: 209). However, whether Khan can be critical of dominant discourse whilst being a part of the 'mainstream' will be under scrutiny here<sup>50</sup>. Khan's profile has meant though, that he has been able to collaborate continuously, which has meant that he continues to break boundaries and be vulnerable in an attempt to keep questioning the 'traditional' and preconceived. He has also been able to highlight the understanding of different cultures and of different value systems.

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<sup>49</sup> For example it has been noted that there is a perception that the hybrid works of celebrated South Asian artists such as writers like Salman Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi, musicians Talvin Singh and Nitin Sawhney, artist Anish Kapoor and choreographers such as Khan and Jeyasingh, respond to expectations and strategically make use of their ethnicity 'to tap into the socio-economic grids of power that support the arts' (Purkayastha 2014 :264). But there is critique aimed at the music of 'Asian Kool' artists like Talvin Singh and Nitin Sawhney who are believed to create a 'heavily sanitised version of a British-Asian "dissident diaspora"' (Banerjea quoted in Jazeel 2005: 334).

<sup>50</sup> Pnina Werbner suggests that the reason why the diasporic arts of South Asian intellectuals ultimately have no impact upon the larger South Asian diaspora is because 'most high cultural works by South Asian intellectuals have been ultimately financed and consumed mainly by a mainstream English and a small secular South Asian elite audience (Werbner 2004 :904).

## Career and development of work

Khan is a second generation British Asian, born in London (his parents moved to the UK in 1972) to Bangladeshi parents. From a young age, his mother introduced him to Bengali folk music and dance in community settings. Aged seven, Khan became a pupil of Sri Pratap Pawar and began a prolonged training under him. He also found himself in two acting roles; the first was at the age of ten in *The Adventures of Mowgli* and the second was in Peter Brook's *Mahabharata*. Khan continued his dance training at De Montfort University and the Northern School of Contemporary Dance. After graduating with a first class honours degree, Khan launched a solo career. He formed the Akram Khan Dance Company and since then, a successful repertoire of performance has followed rapidly, accompanied by Khan's steady and consistent rise to fame and recognition.

Early on in his career, at the turn of the millennium, Khan was heralded as British dance's 'golden boy': he was voted the 'Best British Dancer' in 2001, for example. As was highlighted in Chapter 2, it was at this time that multiculturalism became the watchword in the arts. However, Khan deserves his fame for better reasons than that. He is a master of technique, is a charismatic performer, produces innovative choreography and his work is imbued with artistic intelligence. Alistair Spalding, the artistic director of Sadler's Wells Theatre, London, argues that it is Khan's background that makes him a unique and special artist:

It is one of the reasons I admire what he does. It's not a deliberate effort to be inclusive or multi-racial; he does it subconsciously. That's why he makes

interesting work, because he has the kind of experience in him that he needs to express (Spalding in Blanchard 2008).

Khan and his producer, Farooq Chaudhry, established the Akram Khan Dance Company in 2000 and have created a creative dance company that enables risk-taking and a commercial enterprise to move forward alongside each other; a 'testing ground' for the company's ensemble work. The success of the company is based upon the 'star' quality that Khan brings to his typical movement vocabulary and the entrepreneurial drive provided by Chaudhry, and this combination has promoted the company nationally and internationally. Whilst Khan is a second generation British-Bangladeshi, who has positioned himself as a global and cosmopolitan artist through transnational collaborations, this is supported by the finance and advanced capitalism. Chaudhry is a second generation British-Pakistani who grew up through years of strategic identity negotiation and realised the importance of mobility, but is able to echo Khan's desire to explore the nature of diasporic existences. Early in his career, Khan's talent was recognised with a range of honours and awards. He became an associate artist at the South Bank in 2003 and in 2006 an associate artist with Sadler's Wells, and both organisations commissioned work and helped with promoting Khan and the company.

It is clear that the collaborative process is of utmost importance to Khan and he has worked with artists such as Steve Reich, Hanif Kureshi, Antony Gormley and Nitin Sawhney, where he has had opportunities to develop new ways of working outside the constraints of the funding system and to 'enable the threshold of the fields of dance studies, critical theory and performance studies' (Lepecki 2004: 25). The



Akram Khan Dance Company has three strands: a company limited by guarantee (Akram Khan Dance Company), a charity that promotes and supports education and training (AKCT Advanced Kathak & Contemporary Dance Training) and a commercial partnership (Khan Chaudhry Productions), which allows greater flexibility as to where risk and opportunity can be exploited. Both Khan and Chaudhry work on a freelance basis, so surpluses can be used to support the work of the charity and provide a 'cushion' in years where funding may not be so readily available and when the company may not be generating as much earned income.

Khan does, however, make a very clear contribution to the British dance scene, as his recent repertoire marks a departure and arrival in contemporary British Asian dance discourse simultaneously. Burt has argued that Khan's practice is significant because in contemporary British Asian dance it not only 'initiates dialogues between modern Western aesthetic ideologies and Indian cultural traditions, but the very subject of these dialogues and the new kinds of cultural meaning which they have enabled' (2004a: 1). His choreography was initially abstract in character and was deconstructing the elements of Kathak dance: 'To explore Kathak in the contemporary aesthetic, I needed to cut, layer by layer, like peeling an onion in stages' (Akram Khan, Personal Profile 2013). For example, in *Rush* (2000), Khan worked with Moya Michael and Gwyn Emberton to perform powerful Kathak movements focused above the waist, from the chest, arms and hands with sequences of gestures and motifs together or in canon, calling out rhythm changes in the 'traditional' manner and including rhythmic footwork, and in *Fix* (2000) it builds from 'sculptured, controlled poses to whirling dervish spins' (Ferguson 2000).

*Kaash* (2002) was the first major work Khan had ever done. The piece was an exploration of Hindu Gods, black holes, Indian time cycles, tables, creation and destruction. Until this time, Khan had done mostly solo works and small works of no more than twenty-five minutes, whereas *Kaash* was sixty minutes long and his first evening length work. It was an investigative and ongoing process that lasted over a year and a huge international tour was undertaken. Deborah Jowitt's review acclaimed the piece and described the movement style:

[Khan] hints at Kathak's strong rhythmic footwork, and he designs the body in space with a linear precision akin to that of the North Indian style; he also has recourse to all the cosmopolitan strategies and movement possibilities of Western modern dance. But nothing in his choreography looks like traditional vocabulary (2003).

It is clear that Khan was examining linear and mathematical patterns in *Kaash*. This choreography is much more formal than work that proceeded. The set design too, juxtaposes this mathematical and formal nature. Anish Kapoor's set design is a painting of a framed, huge black hole. It is difficult for the viewer to see where this emptiness begins. The piece starts with a performer gazing into Kapoor's creation, which leads the audience to follow suit. We begin to contemplate the idea of absence and presence in the performance. The image is repeated at the end of the work, when one of the performers becomes fascinated by the back drop. This time though, his body sways from side to side, before he falls and is caught by the other dancers. Ramsay Burt has argued that *Kaash* expressed 'superhuman divine

imagery' not through traditional performative practices but in Khan's negotiation of 'Indian and Western movement ideologies' (Burt 2004b: 105).

Until *Ma* (2005), Khan had performed Kathak dance separately to his ensemble pieces. Indeed the character of the embodiment and psychological engagement experienced by Khan is felt differently in his classical work; 'I have to think like a Kathak dancer, the aesthetic has to be transferred and a mental adjustment made' (Khan in Sanders 2004: 5). Thus, by including the classical Kathak dance from within *Ma* makes it hybrid in nature, due to the inclusion of the value systems of both dance styles and their inseparability. *Ma* was created in collaboration with British South Asian writer Hanif Kureshi and tells the story of a girl who grew up to be a woman, yet is unable to have a child. She prays to God, but to no avail until God tells her that the seeds she planted and has cultivated into trees are actually her children, because she feels for them what a mother feels for her child (see Akram Khan website). Khan's movement style is combined with a narrative imbued with symbolism. The opening image of the piece *Ma* recalls the iconic 9/11 photograph of the nameless body plunging to its death: a man arrested in mid-fall. At the time of the piece, this image was highly visible in the mass media. Undoubtedly, one noted that moment of fragility and vulnerability and it was highly probable that many brought this to the reading of the work. This idea of being upside down constantly reoccurs. *Ma* begins with Faheem Mazher singing in a Sufi vocal style while hanging by his feet with head only a foot or so from the stage floor. Later in the piece, Khan tells a story about his visits as a boy to his family's friend in Bangladesh when he used to hang upside down in a tree to sort his head out. *Ma* was made during the tense period in the UK; coalition forces invaded Iraq in the second Gulf War in 2003. Khan

explains that 'in times like this...there's chaos and the world is in a way for me upside down...as if the world has been pulled from under you' (Khan in anonymous 2004, n.p). Although not specific, the upside down positions included could illustrate this idea of rootlessness; global danger, cultural or personal dislocation. The cultural conditions within which the work was received, performed to worldwide audiences by a multi-racial dance company, highlights the significance of diverse agency.

### **Key issues and themes**

Khan sees his style as constantly evolving and refuses to be categorised as he has managed to develop what he calls a 'confusion' (Khan in Mohaiemen 2005 n.p) of dance styles with the mix of contemporary and Kathak dance techniques in his body. This confusion of dance styles is a condition which can be seen as empowering, transient, and positively embracing of multiplicity. Khan said of his creative process:

There are no formulas. It never feels the same twice and never approaches you in the same way twice. I believe the mind and body are like a library that holds not only your experiences but also those of your ancestors, and so when external forces (like watching a film, or studying a picture, or experiencing a theatre piece) are presented to you, it triggers something within the library of your memory bank and suddenly the file that is triggered opens, and the language of inspiration begins (Khan 2006).

Lorna Sanders (2007) suggests that not only is Khan's practice a challenge to the artistic norms, but that it is also a challenging of theoretical models into finding more appropriate language systems with which to discuss his expression of hybridity. It is not necessary to respond to its intertextuality by our methods and languages of

analysis. Bhabha's notion of the 'third space' is useful here and its 'double consciousness' (Dayal 1996) becomes apparent. In his third and 'in between' space, Khan is able to radically transform the way in which the European dance theatre genre and Kathak performances can continue to develop and progress in their modes of representation.

As was highlighted in Chapter 1, there are different perceptions of 'classicism' in western and eastern thinking: in the West the term suggests a form that is highly refined, and has an elite status in society, whereas, in Eastern thinking it comes from hundreds of years of tradition that is deeply rooted. Kathak dance (like the other classical Indian dances) is developed from within society and preserved and developed (Sundaram's category of 'traditional' which was referred to at the beginning of this chapter is also applicable here). For this reason, Khan has said that he cannot reject a system so deeply embedded in him. It offers him a spiritual basis for his work, which he enjoys merging with the more scientific processes of his contemporary expressions (see Chaudhry 2009). Khan continues to perform Kathak as a solo artist as well as exploring the interface between contemporary and Kathak in his ensemble and collaborative work. He has said that 'when I put my bells on there's a sense of spirituality, which is important to me. Classical is me in search of the spiritual, and contemporary is me searching for science, destroying and taking things apart' (Khan in Jaggi 2010). Khan has reiterated his desire to inhabit an 'in between' space from which he could access his classical Kathak background, as well as reach beyond the strict codification into contemporary dance whilst discussing his collaboration with Sylvie Guillem in *Sacred Monsters* (2006) saying that in the latter however, he 'can't reach somewhere higher; there is no sense of

spirituality; I feel I have no freedom to reach out there; so the most beautiful place for me to be is a place [in-between] where I can reach both worlds at the same time' (Akram Khan Company 2013).

Khan's work has become increasingly narrative over the course of his career. It could be assumed that Kathak influences are reasserted, but Khan's story-telling has multiple wellsprings which are brought to bear in cross-disciplinary collaborations with artists from diverse cultural contexts. Spoken text and text-based improvisatory processes, grounded in autobiography, inject new ingredients into his work. Khan feels that it is only by exploring personal stories that are personal and are carried with him and his dancers that a narrative with universal relevance can be discovered and revealed (Khan in Katrak 2011: 215). The type of physical theatre Khan produces re-contextualises heritage for global audiences. Khan states that 'where the boundaries are broken down, languages of origin are left behind and instead individual experiences are pushed forward' (Khan in Mitra 2008, np). In *The Location of Culture* (1994) Bhabha suggests that hybridity does not replace the polarities of cultural difference with an alternative, unproblematic, pluralist concept. He proposes that postcolonial hybridity is not a simple accretion which resolves tensions. Instead of being *one* and the *other* combined, hybridity is 'neither "one" nor other' (1994: 127). It is my argument here that Contemporary Kathak is *neither* one genre nor the other, but that both exist simultaneously, interacting in a non-totalising form which embraces ambiguity. Khan's work challenges easy notions of hybridity and resists definition.

## ***Zero Degrees (2005)***

Katrak has highlighted that Khan considers *zero degrees* as 'probably his most important work' and that it 'changed the way of thinking for European theatre' (Khan in Katrak 2011: 209). *Zero degrees* was created with Flemish-Moroccan dancer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and sculptor Anthony Gormley, which evokes a sense of in-betweenness that the body negotiates in both geographical and political space. The in-between space allows Khan to explore his fascination with movement between extremes; between 'the extreme speed' and then 'the extreme stillness' in Kathak. But importantly in terms of my analysis, the piece 'symbolises the rite of passage between life and death, belonging and non-belonging and most importantly identity and the lack of it' (Khan in Katrak 2011: 212). *Zero degrees* is choreographed and performed 'in-between' cultures which allows for a questioning of the notion of identity formation; between the 'origin', 'new home' or globalised context. *Zero degrees* is a complex work which remains, for some, beyond logical academic analysis, for example, reviewer David Dougill wrote of the performance that 'I left perplexed, because too much is esoteric, a complex of ideas not fully clarified on stage' (2006). It will be argued that the piece is postmodern due to its embracing of ambiguity, complexity, intertextuality and its ability to problematise operations of power. The piece was generally well received by critics and toured extensively to many high profile mainstream theatres and venues, but whether it was read as critical to the dominant discourse and/or whether it just allowed the highlighting of political and identity issues needs to be considered.

*Zero degrees* marked a departure from his previous repertoire which had consisted of solo and group choreography and began a 'period where the exchange of information is significant in artist-to-artist collaboration' (Sanders 2005). Unlike some other British Asian artists (Jeyasingh, for example), Khan is not interested in 'contemporising the classical forms'. His investigations are about exploring his diasporic identity which is dynamic and volatile; the pieces are not formalist, but content-driven. Bhabha's conception of the diaspora is relevant here as the piece is occupying a 'third space' which is dynamic and enabling of 'new possibilities'. This is useful for analysing Khan's work and its 'double consciousness':

The borderline work of the culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past, reconfiguring it as a contingent 'in between' space, that innovates, and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessary, not the nostalgia, of living (Bhabha 1994: 7).

Both collaborators grew up Muslim in Europe, learned the same prayers and endured the same Western stereotypes of Islam. Inspired by their own dual identities, the two search for this middle point through polar opposites: becoming/death, light/dark, chaos/order. Thus, Khan's collaboration with Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui on *zero degrees* is a clear example of this recalling of the past and refiguring it for the present through a mixture of dialogue and movement on several levels.



Firstly, the piece begins by telling a personal narrative which explores the 'third space' of 'in betweenness'. The two dancers walk into the enormous, white cubicle space which provides no reference to time and place. They begin by telling Khan's autobiographical account of a journey across the border between Bangladesh and India, set in this political and geographical border space. They both sit cross-legged on the floor and in perfect unison tell the story 'matter-of-factly' with hand gestures punctuating the narrative, even though this is Khan's story. On one level, this section can be understood as an understanding of empathy or a process of feeling oneself in another person or time. Khan draws attention to the fact that in the current climate of globalised identities a passport is the only stable form of identification by saying, 'I watched my passport pass through the hands of all the guards and I didn't let it out of my sight, because although it's just a piece of paper, without it you have no identity' (Zero Degrees 2005). The passport is highlighted as the power of asserting one's identity, and how its lack can transform someone into 'a nobody'. The narrative continues fragmented throughout the piece. The choreography recounts Khan's memory of a particular point in his journey when he finds himself unable to help a dying man on the train and is asked to ignore the repeated requests from the wife for help. Khan was disturbed by the detachment of his fellow passengers; none of whom offered to help. His family members also advised him not to help, since as a 'foreign witness' (a British citizen of Bangladeshi descent) he should avoid the 'bureaucratic hassles'. Cherkaoui helps tell Khan's story, and because he has also grown up in the West in an immigrant family, there is a sense of empathy and he is in a position to understand the nuances that white, Western spectators might not completely grasp. However, Khan and the cousin who tells Khan not to get involved, are also able to relate to Khan from a position of difference – the cousin as a Bangladeshi and

Cherkaoui as a Belgian. The 'burdens of representation' and acceptances of responsibility are clearly laid out.

The use of autobiography breaks boundaries and is an integral part of the work. The broken sections of text, the re-presentation of the actual events and the reflection on these events prompts the viewer to consider the wider context: his personal identity is negotiated throughout the performance. His words are contradicted and corroborated by his choice of movements, for example, Zoe Norridge (2010) observes the static, cross legged seated position of the dancers is unusual and contradictory given the narrative's resonance with movement. It is as if the two performers are posing a set of questions to the audience. It is a very personal narrative, and yet, the two dancers perform in such synchronicity and deliver the text and gestures in a manner that does not empathise the emotions that Khan must have been feeling at the time. Further, the way in which 'Khan's physicality becomes feminine, submissive and soft...juxtaposed against his memory of the dying man's wife on the train crying for help in vain' (Mitra 2008), is an emotional example of the postmodern and tradition juxtaposition seen in the work.

Mitra argues that the 'movement vocabulary transcends their individual technique to create a new hybrid language as their bodies communicate embodiment of lived history' (2008). The 'new possibilities' that are found within the dynamism of the 'third space' are manifested in movement content, so that there is no reference to pain and nostalgia which was experienced and constructed by earlier British Asian migrants, for example, and no singular movement tradition exists as authentic and over-

arching. The dancing in the piece begins with the men delicately interlacing their limbs. Gradually their movement becomes more rhythmic and violent, until Khan is bending Cherkaoui around like a flexible doll and bouncing him like a ball. When it all seems to be too much to handle, they transfer their passions, misery and anger, to their dummies which have been lying on the floor from the start. There are moments when stylised Kathak movements are performed (such as a series of fast spins and fluid, intricate hand gestures) but these are followed or juxtaposed with freer and more pedestrian gestures seen in contemporary dance movements; this mirrors Bhabha's conception of the dynamic nature of culture, and the flimsy consistency of the historical narratives that cultures rely upon to draw boundaries and define themselves. The performers do, however, keep their individuality and own performance qualities. Khan's body works in athletic straight lines, while Cherkaoui demonstrates his flexibility in amazing curves and 'elastic' positions: Cherkaoui seems to tie himself in knots as he spins around his own head on the floor. Mitra (2008) argues that Khan's vulnerable verbal recollection of the narrative of non-belonging contrasts with the visual and physical power with which he commands the space. I would agree with this since Khan's erect use of the spine, which is central to the Kathak technique, gives a sense of power, and there is a real sense of 'commanding' the space. There is a section when Cherkaoui takes off his shoes to emulate Khan's barefoot Kathak footwork, but the movement seems 'foreign' and slightly uneasy. Though Khan has the grace and precision of a classical dancer, Cherkaoui holds the balance of power through his vulnerability.

The themes that Khan forefronts in *zero degrees* are very important because he recognises and highlights the senseless death and erasing of identity. It prompts the

audience to question and consider these issues. The work takes on greater significance and poignancy when one considers that *zero degrees* made its premiere at Sadler's Wells Theatre, London, the day after the London bombings. Khan noted that:

The London bombings had a big impact on me. I suddenly became aware of my own colour and the way I was looked at, carrying a bag on a train. I grew self-conscious in a way I never was before – especially in London. There's a paranoia (Khan in Jaggi 2010 n.p).

The reviews (for example, Watts 2005 and Boccadoro 2006) of *zero degrees* make significant reference to the dancers' identity and shared Muslim religion, even though religion is not necessarily tackled throughout the performance. Perhaps this is due to the problem that was highlighted in the introduction, because there is an attempt to 'understand' the work of dancers from 'other' cultures and the perceived theme that are 'relevant' to them. Thus, when the piece is placed into the context of what was happening at the time, there is a lack of tolerance of difference, especially of Muslims which followed the fall-out from 9/11, which heightened people's awareness of the Muslim religion and identity.

The recounting of the past in the present is really significant of the transient identity of the diaspora. Just like the train journey described throughout the piece, the audience experiences a range of emotions and thoughts as it progresses and develops. When the narration resumes, phrase are hesitant, revealing his confused reactions at the time. When Khan reaches the last bit of his story, his voice trails off,

as if suddenly struck by this event; he has no idea why he should be so affected by the death of someone he did not even know. Inarticulate in speech, Khan expresses his remembered feelings through reflective gestures. Cherkaoui sings a lament, then catches Khan as he falls and carries him off, as inert as his dummy. The piece opens up many debates and areas for consideration, specifically about selfhood, identity and death, in a way that is far from arrogant, but forceful, so although the piece has made it into the 'mainstream' it has provoked a response from its audience about a British Asian whose identity is formed and negotiated; hybridity is demonstrated through Khan's cultural memories, notions of belonging and an exploration of the cultural displacement.

Khan and Cherkaoui are onstage alongside two white mannequin dummies which the sculptor, Gormley, cast of the two dancers. On one level, the white figures are used to represent the way in which the two dancers are figuratively dragging around their past and baggage; recounting the past in the present, whilst at other times, they might signify the 'sameness' of humanity. Throughout the performance, the two men respond to each other: occasionally performing in unison and speaking in synchronisation, for example, during the opening recitation of Khan's experiences as a visitor to Bangladesh; at other times they enact conflict, which is demonstrated when Cherkaoui violently kicks Khan's dummy and Khan's body responds as if he is actually being kicked himself. The two dummies seem to represent both the anonymity of appearances and the reproduction or cloning of identity. Lorna Sanders (2007) said that the modelling process used by Gormley drew on notions of the recycling of images and although the quotation was made in respect to Andy Warhol's multiple replicas of Marilyn Monroe's face, it is pertinent because of the

doubles of Khan and Cherkaoui also show simultaneously 'the death of the original and the end of representation' (Baudrillard 1983: 136). Descriptions given by Khan (2006) of being encased in silicone material during the modelling process and the feeling of being suffocated while it dried out, suggest a kind of 'death' of the original. Sanders suggests, therefore, that the artists and the dummy replicas of themselves, opens up the question of whether there is anything within us that is authentic, essential and unreproducible of our own. Using the dummies to represent self and other simultaneously, Khan aligns the diasporic experience of in-betweenness with erasure, transience and growth.

At one point, Cherkaoui adjusts his replica dummy; he shakes its hand, pats its shoulder and makes it pat his shoulder in return. He brushes its cheek as it brushes his. Cherkaoui is in control of both sets of actions, but then the dummy suddenly hits out at him, hammering him down to the floor. There are many possible meanings that could be ascribed to this moment, but it is as if the dummy is finally exercising its own agency, and taking on a sense of humanness. There are other instances where action that are done to the dummy affect the human counterpart; Cherkaoui aims several kicks at Khan's dummy and Khan ricochets away as if being kicked himself. This seems to represent the way in which negative actions done to another have an effect on us, or the way in which negative effects on our spiritual self can manifest themselves physically. The white dummies are able to stand and be manipulated in a spooky semblance of human action. The confrontation with the dummies demonstrate the various processes of 'in tune' with their 'owners' because on the most primary level the process of mirroring reveals our reflection with a model represents a way of understanding that nothingness and sameness simultaneously.

*Zero degrees* was commissioned by Sadler's Wells, London, because of its policy to commission and produce new work. The ethnic diversity of Khan and Cherkoai, and the emphasis on creation, newness and optimism is part of the reason why this collaboration has seen so much positive press, and has toured across the UK extensively. Khan has been able to occupy a significant and important role within the mainstream British dance canon: his 'otherness' is being re-written in public view. He has been able to challenge pre-existing frameworks, as well as demanding an acknowledgement of his identity formation as a British Asian. Khan's more recent collaborative work in particular, has moved away from the deconstruction of Kathak technique that we saw in *Rush* for example, to a communication of a lived history in the development of complex and innovative dance theatre work. Dance theatre oscillates between representational and embodied performances of cultural self-definition. Further, dance theatre also speaks of cultural sameness within difference, since each dance presents an individual and simultaneously shared history (see Balme 1999). The controversial question of an alleged universality of dance movement is thus raised against the apparent individuality of movement created by different enculturation processes. While everybody does indeed move, the particular style and significance of such movement may vary considerably. Dance theatre not only translates between movements and language; the kinaesthetic and the written, but also has to examine a complex web of different cultural contexts.

Following my interrogation of postmodernism in Chapter 2, I feel it appropriate to classify *zero degrees* as politically postmodern, due to the artistic choices about form

and content, and not just because of the aesthetic category (although the fragments of language, partial gestures, images, sounds, expressions are all presented in interrupted form to be reassembled into a heterogeneous surface of exposure to breakage and discontinuity). Peter Brinson (1991) has highlighted the importance of living in the present and the need of the audience to comprehend social responsibility in concert with the artists; there has been criticism of *zero degrees* due to the personal narrative that is shared, for example, Clement Crisp wrote in the *Financial Times* that he can detect a 'persistent whiff of pretentiousness' and 'an introspective anxiety that is tiresome to the extreme' (2005 n.p). For Crisp the personal stories of the performers is of no interest or value and Crisp would perhaps be happier if it was fictitious. However, this work needs an engagement on a different level and is able to problematise once accepted notions of power (see Briginshaw 1996). Khan is clearly working from meaning or purpose to create work, and not the other way round. In postmodern performance, it is no longer necessary to separate ourselves from our past and Khan makes no attempt to do that here.

### **Akram Khan: Conclusion**

Mitra (2005) has argued that because of the extreme codification of Kathak dance and the training methods used, Kathak dancers become capable of virtuosity in rendering technique but are denied an identity, and the expression of the self is an impossibility. This can be seen as slightly contentious, as often in many non-Western performance traditions there is a desire to access a state of spirituality (but not always a function of dance). It may be the case however, in this globalised context, that there is more of an attempt to replicate and imitate the guru figure seen in the



'traditional' teaching of Indian dance to become a 'technician'. It could also be attributed to India's post-Independence attempt to focus on secularisation of the nation and the embracing of modernism (Williams 1989: 83-4). It was also considered in the introduction that Western academics and critics attempt to embrace and highlight the formal aspects of non-Western choreography and movement in order to write about the work in a manner that does not 'exoticise'. In the analysis of Khan's choreography, it has been noticeable that he is unafraid to 'take on' traits of Western physical theatre practices by including personal, political, emotional and physical. Physical theatre demonstrates an understanding and willingness to expose one's self as the genre attempts to 'provide glimpses of the dancer's subjectivity in motion' (Albright 1997: 2). Thus, Khan has been able to explore his own narrative (and those of his collaborators), his identity and sense of self as a British Asian artist. Just as the forerunners of modern dance saw their new way of dancing as a sense of liberating their expression from the technique and codification of ballet, it appears that Khan is not censoring the content of his work but extending the very 'site of resistance' (Fiske in Banes 1994: 46). Just as theorists like Bhabha, Hall and Gilroy have celebrated hybridity as a powerful interventionist tool, so too, has Khan utilised hybridity in order to create agency for the diasporic artist; the use of dance theatre has allowed an emotional narrative to be told alongside the bodily movement, the focus on negotiating identity and the criticism that identity comes from a singular source and an ability to articulate a perspective on socio-political issues.

However, it is important to be realistic about how 'innovative', 'original' and critical Khan can be whilst positioned within a mainstream dance context. For example, in the programme notes for *zero degrees* it was noted that:

By no means expect a new, perfect blend of two languages. Language does not evolve that way, neither bodily or verbally. If it did, the result would be gobbledegook. Language evolves slowly, renews itself organically, soaks up elements from other languages, finds creative translations for 'foreign' elements. And the more two people understand and respect the other language and culture, the more effective and interesting the translation process (programme notes 2005).

As Khan has highlighted in interviews, he is interested in the exchange process and *zero degrees* and his other collaborations have clearly been an attempt to reiterate this, but possibly also an attempt to contextualise his high profile work as an ongoing process. Within the mainstream, the speed and accelerated notion of how 'innovative' an artist should be can be misjudged. It has been clear charting the development of Khan's work, that every work and creative act has been transformative and *zero degrees* has continued this, but needless to say, he has kept the 'origin' and source of Kathak dance and references to his personal identity as a constant so that he is 'living in the present'. This is another feature which makes Khan's work politically postmodern since the postmodern in dance does not focus on searching for something 'new' that will overturn a set of cultural practices, a gesture of rebellion in the tradition of Euro-American innovation, but is a constantly negotiated search. The search is dependent on a politics that is arrived at through contemporary life situations (such as the one highlighted in *zero degrees*). Khan attempts to highlight universal assumptions about identity. During Khan's career, he

has continually journeyed to create a new way of moving in response to the source of inspiration (and his collaborators have helped this process) as his understanding of his cultural identity develops; despite the expectations of him as a British Asian choreographer, he has been able to abandon the known and familiar in order to try and imagine new and previously inconceivable possibilities for aesthetic experience.

### **British South Asian Dance: Conclusions**

This chapter has demonstrated through the analysis of the work of Jeyasingh, Khoo and Khan, that British South Asian dancers who delve thoughtfully into the process of creative work and engage cerebrally with classical Indian dance forms, are able to show the differing identities of being postcolonial agents and how best they feel to represent these through their dance investigations. Katrak has argued that in the explosion of creative choreography by Contemporary Indian dancers in India and the diaspora 'artists engage with and transform Indian traditional dance in multiple avenues' (2011: xviii). Further, Katrak argues that Contemporary Indian dance demands thoughtful engagement, and minimalism is one movement avenue along with others to inspire thought. Jeyasingh's abstract and formalist choreography, for example, has sometimes been seen as cold and mechanical, but in deconstructing Bharata Natyam it is necessary to acknowledge the history of the form and not be bound by it, and understand that the 'contemporary' structures visible can provoke an emotional response and engagement: 'In contemporary times, *rasa*, evoke by the self-reflexivity of contemporary artists includes both emotion and thought; the gaps in-between emotion and thought are filled by raising social awareness in certain choreographies' (ibid: xxi).

Second generation dancers in Britain, like Khan, share an interest and lived experience of hybridity. Their willingness to discuss the arts in postmodern globalisation enables progression, creativity, artistic ownership to surface in the art. Katrak and Mitra have both argued that Khan's work demands the acknowledgement of a new identity for the genre of Contemporary Indian Dance that is now an undeniable reality (Katrak 2011, Mitra 2008). As has been highlighted through examination of the historical context of Bharata Natyam and Kathak dance at the beginning of this chapter, the concept of 'innovation' is not new to the forms. During the revivalist movement of the 1920s and early 1930s, when dance became associated with 'ancient forms', key figures like Uday Shankar and Rabindranath Tagore imbued new aesthetics into the 'classical' forms (see Erdman 1996). What is new, however, is that today's 'innovation' has links to consumer culture and globalisation. Innovative choreography in Kathak (such as that created by Khan) is not in opposition to tradition, but is best understood as an evolution of the dance form from nationalism to globalisation. The proliferation of dance innovation reflects the cultural heterogeneity of a new democratic politics. This is perhaps the reason why much innovation embraces collaborative work (as has been seen predominantly in the work of Khan). The work of contemporary British South Asian dance practitioners demonstrated this 'innovation' manifested in stripping away the necessity for narrative, mimetic gestures and so on, which was a key component in the classical forms. This has allowed for a contemporary aesthetic through the abstract patterns and movements of the body, whilst the body is still marked and seen as culturally specific.

Neither Jeyasingh nor Khan claims to represent the classical styles. Yet, the reference in the marketing material to these starting points is nevertheless picked up by writers and critics, who redefine the established styles as 'traditional' and the other work as contemporary. Audiences assume that because they have become quite familiar with Bharata Natyam and Kathak dance, that this is what they see in their work, when actually the choreography has a complex relationship with modernism and postmodernism, amongst others. For example, Jeyasingh has made it clear that she wants to be referred to as a contemporary British choreographer (recognised in the same breath as Siobhan Davies, for example), rather than a South Asian choreographer. It is convenient for arts venues, marketing specialists and other advisors to suggest and impose the 'classical label' onto those artists so that audiences are 'comfortable'. The artists will then take their loyal audiences on the evolutionary path. There is also the discourse that has been engaged in by the likes of Khoo, Sonia Sabri, Anurekha Ghosh and Jayachandran Palazhy, which is about the classical and contemporary aesthetic as different from the traditional. However, Khoo's status with these 'loyal audiences' and use of classical technique renders him more vulnerable to surveillance which may go some way in explaining why he has explored gender in quite a subtle manner through his work and his ethnicity, class, family circumstance and global network has all helped in creating his image and marketing strategies.

Jeyasingh has deployed Bharata Natyam based movement content to create works with a highly modernist tradition that can avoid both narrative and lyric dramatic modes. Bharata Natyam artists are choosing and selecting elements of the dance forms past over others, which produces political positions. These histories, as sets of

political choices align Bharata Natyam with communities both 'imagined' (Anderson 1991) and immediate. Both Jeyasingh and Khoo deliberately place the form in the British context – literally and metaphorically. At all 'stages in the development' of British South Asian dance practice, Jeyasingh, Khoo and Khan have been able to question the concepts of classicism, modernism, postmodernism and globalisation: 'Contemporary Indian dance aims to make the audience think (not divorced from emotional response) about social injustice and inspire action leading to change' (Katrak 2011: 3). Contemporary South Asian dance as a label, reflects where Asian dance has reached in the UK and clearly British Asian dance has a voice. But, the question may arise as to whether dancers who are only exposed to this contemporary work may be encouraged to veer away from the classical before the form has truly become part of them.

## Chapter 4

### Issues surrounding the term 'Black Dance'

This chapter is about highlighting the key issues around the label 'Black dance' and its development within the British context. It aims to provide a theoretical history of the usage of 'Black dance', a historical overview of the development of Black dance (hindered by misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the 'Black' forms by critics, policy makers, marketing managers and other advisors), before an analysis of the work of the chosen case studies in order to illuminate the disruptive effect they have to normative ideologies of western dance and placing value on the strategies they have developed in order to make work that questions and subverts.

I will explain the use of the label 'Black dance' in relation to the American and British context. Being both 'Black' and British is a cultural identity that is often expressed as ambivalent, conflicted and deeply felt, but, also has some 'political currency'. Thus, it is necessary to contextualise how the term 'Black dance' has been employed and developed historically (at times as a political statement both in America and in Britain, but also how it has been used by funders as an overarching category that serves to homogenise the diversity of African and Caribbean dances) and analyse the work of British based dancers who are Black and the differences in context, response to and specificity of work produced by British based dancers who are Black comes from the particular routes by which dance and music practices and traditions have reached Britain from the African diaspora. These dancers and companies have been excluded from the mainstream British dance canon, its history and dominant discourse. This situation has been exacerbated by the use of the term 'Black dance',

generalising from an American point of view as Brenda Dixon Gottschild argues: 'Black people's culture, black people's bodies are everywhere – a constellation of attitudes-habits-predilections, the sum of which are reduced to the least common denominator by using the terms "black dance" and "black dancing bodies"' (2003: 98-9). The term 'Black dance' has remained undefined despite having been used by many for several decades. It has been used by critics, funding agencies and audience members alike to suggest that all work by black dancers belong to the same aesthetic which is distinct and separate from a category of 'white dance'. Instead of thorough definition, there have been many characteristics and/or stereotypes. Similar to the issues with the term 'South Asian' Dance, 'Black dance' does not allow the freedom to express one's own culture; placing all choreographers under the umbrella term institutionalised the distinction. This is an effect of cultural imperialism and does not allow the diversity of the work to be recognised. Gottschild highlights the fact that when one speaks of 'black dance' the term predicates the existence of 'white dance'; its unacknowledged counterpart (2003: 8). The term 'African dance' is a little more specific, but still does not fully describe the category and/or the work that is being created.

The label 'Black dance' is also problematic due to the nature in which its history has been documented and disseminated. The history of African American dance has been established longer than Black British dance: the infrastructure and development of Black British dance has hindered its progression and legitimacy. For example, in *Voicing Black Dance* (2007) 'Funmi Adewole recalls delivering a lecture to students about the history of Black dance at a London dance conservatoire. Before starting, she asked students for their feedback about what they already knew



about the topic. The students were able to recount several African American companies/dancers including Pearl Primus, Katherine Dunham, Alvin Ailey, Dance Theatre of Harlem, Urban Bush Women and Bill T Jones. However, when asked about Black British companies such as Adzido, Kokuma, Badejo Arts, Irie! Dance Theatre or Lawal they had not heard about them (Adewole in ADAD 2007: 12-32). Despite having a long and rich history, there are currently very few traces of past Black cultural activities that have been archived and information readily available which the Association of Dance of the African Diaspora (ADAD) has started to rectify. This could also be why critics in this country always compare British companies such as Phoenix to 'bigger and better' African American counterparts. In scholarship about 'Blackness' there has been a preoccupation with visual culture in its representations of blacks while simultaneously black visual culture is neglected. There has been a fixation with getting images of blacks 'right' as a way of countering stereotypes, or what Michele Wallace and others have described as the debate over 'negative/positive images' (1990a). Deborah Baddoo has been a pioneer in the development and promotion of Black dance in Britain. She founded 'States of Emergency' in 1986 and the work that was created was inspired by her reflection on state of emergency that was declared in South Africa. Baddoo has had to liaise with venues in order to get her work booked and promoted and yet, the process is still 'haunted' by the fact that there is ignorance about 'black dance':

A lot of venues still see black dance as a quota thing, rather than looking at each company on their style and merit...some venues feel that if they have booked **Tavaziva Dance**, they cannot also have, say **Kompany Malakhi** in the same season. They cannot seem to, or want to, differentiate and acknowledge that they are from two companies which might come from completely different aesthetics. Promoters also often plead ignorance about what work by Black choreographers is actually out there, or question the

quality, using this as an excuse not to programme it. They need to get out more, to commit to seeing a range of black work, attend Festivals in the UK and abroad where they can educate themselves on the quality and range of work and then get on and programme it! (Baddoo 2009, n.p).

Zita Allen has noted that the term 'Black dance' was initially deployed by white mainstream critics to separate artistic endeavours by African American choreographers and dancers from the rest of concert dance in America as a kind of cultural apartheid, and it implied some decisions taken on behalf of black artists, about what belonged and did not belong in this field. Allen argues that 'in spite of the fact that this label has no clear-cut definition, it has acquired a power almost as great as its meaning is obscure' (Allen 1988: 22). So whilst the term has been diversified and reclaimed by some black artists, giving it some kinds of 'cultural power', it functions within a context that is pervaded by an oppressive racial hierarchy and thus there may be some 'aesthetic preferences' already implicitly favoured.

In the UK especially, when the term 'African' dance is used, there is a connotation that traditional dance is being referred to, such as that performed by Adzido. The film *DanceAfrica* (2004) has illustrated the relevance of personality development within young people in the UK, and how such experiences supplement the aesthetic qualities which are then imbued and developed. Lola Anderson of Ekome reinforced in this film that it was during the period of 1976-2004 that people were only really of Ipi Tombi. Ipi Tombi was a 1974 musical by South African writers Bertha Egnos Godfrey and her daughter Gail Lakier, telling the story of a young black man leaving his village and young wife to work in the mines of Johannesburg; the show utilises pastiches of a variety of South African indigenous musical styles. It was this

commercialisation of black styles, the use of caricature and stereotypical representations, which attracted audiences. Once funding became less of an issue for practitioners in the UK, companies such as Adzido, Kokuma and Badejo Arts reached a peak in the 1980s. This meant that there was a greater access to such companies and encouraged people to learn movement characteristic of African dance. During this time, a forum for black dance in Britain was established which contributed to the recognition of African dance as a social facility. Shortly after which, academia developed and the emphasis was magnified into African 'Classical' culture (with encouragement from ACE) in association with an 'ethnic arts' initiative.

In *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African-American Dance* DeFrantz highlights that during the 1960s and 1970s in particular, the term 'Black dance' was employed by many journalists (those affiliated with the mainstream and Black press), but the term gradually fell out of use in dance writing due to its controversial, dubious invention (2002: 15). Zita Allen's 1988 article *What is Dance?* probed the various definitions of the term and argued that to create a meaning for 'Black dance' was 'presumptuous' (1998: 22-3). In 2001, dance critic Christopher Reardon revisited Allen's inquiry in the article *What is Black Dance?: A Cultural Melting Pot*. Reardon argues that what complicates the definition and application of the term 'Black dance' is the 'facility with which Black dancers and choreographers have absorbed and spread cultural influences' (2001: 4). But given the ongoing arguments for the use of the term 'Black dance' within the context of the persistent and politicised, racist system, it might be argued that term should be made redundant, but Takiyah Nur Amin argues that:

Making the choice to disregard Black dance as a term and category contributes to the further denial and marginalisation of the ongoing, multiple and meaningful ways in which Black people have articulated themselves and interpreted human experiences through dance in popular, theatrical, secular and religious contexts (Amin 2011: 12)

Gottschild (2003) has argued that the black dancing body has been scrutinised by the dominant culture through the lens and theory of difference. The dancing of 'black people', for example, many social forms and hip hop, have occasionally been valued throughout history, but frequently these have been scrutinised for signs of inferiority. Thus, as Gottschild argues in *The Black Dancing Body*, this is clearly very hypocritical due to the fact that dancing bodies have also been judged against white ideals that have run counter to the aesthetic criteria of 'inferior' Africanist cultures, even though the dances performed by white dancing bodies were either solely or partly based on African elements. Developments and advancements in body therapies (such as Alexander, Pilates, Klein and Trager for example) have meant that the dance world has found a means and language of dealing with differences in the dancing body. These therapies have illuminated the idea that there is no longer an issue with inferior and superior anatomies, but rather, alignment, cultural movement choices and habits. The black dancing body has proven that with equal opportunity it can excel in whichever dance form it chooses. It is only bias, ethnocentricity or racism that has hindered this mainstream understanding. No dance form is based upon a 'natural body'; every dance form carries with it its own human made aesthetic criteria that represents a particular culture's needs, aspirations, preferences and dislikes in a particular era, and thus, even 'traditional'

and/or 'classical' forms have changed over time. Classical forms have had to adapt or will start to 'fade away'.

Halifu Osumare and Julinda Lewis-Ferguson (1991) have highlighted that at a panel deliberating 'Will the Black choreographer always be Black?' in 1989, artists such as Bill T Jones wondered whether the contemporary need to claim a black heritage would be so strongly felt by posterity, while the comments of some others hinted at a desire to work with more 'global' themes. As with some British Asian choreographers, there is a desire and urge shared by some British based artists who are Black to claim the complexities of this position 'in-between' cultures, revealing the contradictions and complexities, and the many differences that characterise the 'black' communities.

Audience members at an African, Diaspora or Caribbean dance performance are usually transformed by the dance they witness into clapping, shouting or rhythmically moving participants due to exciting movement and rhythms created by the performers. As spectators, they become enthralled by the bodily movement and rhythms of African-derived dance. Yvonne Daniel (2011) argues that the audience are stimulated aesthetically and engaged emotionally as performers seduce their attentiveness and stimulate even keener interest. Consequently, so-called spectators become participants as they travel the path of aesthetic transformation. Thus, the transcendent potential within African, Caribbean, or diasporic dance practice is important.

Ramdhanie (2005: 4) has noted that African theatrical dance emerged because of 'black attitudes' towards marginalisation and discrimination in British cities. Further, he argues that the continuity of the forms owes much to the spirituality of its practitioners, and thus the dancers from Africa survived the Middle passage and re-emerged in Britain through the continuity of practice of traditional and syncretic religions. However, the re-emergence of the forms, as social and theatrical activities, were directly linked to the community activities of black political activists and thus gained credence outside the black churches. Increased interest in the form organically manifested itself primarily amongst young, discontented black people within inner cities around the UK who were finding it difficult to articulate their political aspirations through verbal communications and debates.

### **Black British dance history**

In 1978, Stuart Hall identified the relationship between the black diaspora and Britain as 'the land which they are *in* but not *of*, the country of estrangement, dispossession and brutality' (1978: 357), whereby the conscious orchestration of identity around 'blackness' at this time was crucially concerned with the need to express resistance and protest against a white national British culture that appeared fairly definable and monolithic. The politicisation of black consciousness in the 1970s – when the media was reporting race riots, mugging and carnival, led to a powerful and damaging representation of black youth as criminalised and subcultural – was clearly a reaction and opposition to state and racism and offered a vital, if limited, platform for self-representation. However, Donnell (2002) has argued that this relationship between

street politics and acts of representation was mutually beneficial to many of the cultural practitioners and products of this decade and continued the intellectual traditions of Black Britain that, like those in the Caribbean and other ex-colonial regions, have always been engaged with political and rights movements. There was the sense that artists, practitioners and cultural activists were providing intellectuals and theorists with what Hall has termed a 'new vocabulary and syntax of rebellion' (1978). Moreover, this cross-fertilisation between the street and the study, and the need to pursue questions of representation alongside those of rights was always an organic process. Ramdhanie (2005) has argued however, that in England, many of the dancers that were initially involved in the 1970s were young and disenfranchised and though they may not have been conscious about their statements about the dominant discourse and establishment, they were aware about the impact that they were having on the cultural landscape by implanting African and Caribbean dance in the new context. Due to the presence of African dance growing from youth culture, it represented a non-violent and creative protest, rather than serious artistic endeavour: 'ghetto dance with attitude' (2005: 6).

Dancers and musicians coming directly from the African continent also brought their particular forms of rituals, symbols and religious practice and these fused, and in some cases, offered more challenging opportunities for social and theatrical performances, when they combined with the Caribbean dance experience. The cultural and political projects of the 1970s had enabled a shift in terms of identification and representation, from being perceived as the black presence in Britain to the black dimension of Britain in the 1980s. Although the catalyst for mainstream public exposure in this decade was still police racism and the civil

disturbances that followed (1981, 1985), there was a more consolidated profile of commentators from within the black community and an established and accomplished set of practitioners in film, visual arts, music, writing and performance works. However, if Black British culture now had a more visible and coherent profile within the national culture, within itself fractures were beginning to be felt and, by the mid-1980s, there was also a more sustained questioning of the usefulness of black as an organising category. This came from the voices of an emergent Black British cultural studies, in many ways initiated by the important work of Hall; in the 1960s and 1970s, Hall emerged as the leading exponent of cultural studies, and by the 1980s he was one of the most persuasive and vocal public intellectuals in debates on Thatcherism, race and racism (see Hall 1978, 1980, 1988, 1989). The collective commitment to achieving cultural recognition, voice and visibility did not necessitate conformity or ideological consensus. The fact that there were tensions, conflicts and serious differences among key thinkers, practitioners and commentators was publicly highlighted by the now notorious exchange between Salmon Rushdie, Stuart Hall and Darcus Howe, in January of 1987, over the representational strategies and aesthetic value of the film *Handsworth Songs*, for example, which resulted in a series of letters printed in *The Guardian* (January 12, 15, 19, 1987; reprinted in Mercer 1988). Although this 'opening up' of how Black British people should represent themselves was partly due to the growth of interest and work being done in this area, it was also crucial in terms of the expectations and constraints under which Black artists were working.

The increasing diversification within 'black dance' was the predominant factor in the collapse of the Black Dance Development Trust (BDDT), an organisation that from



the 1980s attempted to cater for African and Caribbean dance practitioners through funding, training and administration. Its main ambiguity was in whether their use of the term 'African and Caribbean dance' referred to the cultural origin of practitioners or to the styles that they were using. This lack of focus meant that the BDDT could not effectively meet the targets stated in its policy and its funding was withdrawn. In its place the Association of Dance of the African Diaspora (ADAD) emerged with a more sophisticated acknowledgement of the diversity in Black British Dance.

Despite inevitable tensions, in the 1990s there was a strong sense that these differences within the black community were both important and enabling to articulations of identity and creative works. Cultural and scholarly interests were less directed towards more complex and diverse acts of self-definition, and participation in reconfigurations of national culture. As Gilroy documents: 'Extraordinary new forms have been produced and much of their power resides in their capacity to circulate a new sense of what it means to be British' (1993: 61-2). Although less optimistic about the receptiveness of British society, Hall seems to echo Gilroy's perception of Black British culture's recognition of its own value and cultural capital in his observation that: 'Black British culture is today confident beyond its own measure in its own identity – secure in a difference which it does not expect, or want, to go away, still rigorously and frequently excluded by the host society, but nevertheless not excluding itself in its own mind' (1997, in Owusu 2000: 127).

In a written response to *Time for Change: A Framework for the Development of African People's Dance Forms* (2000) to ACE, the London Arts Board Principal Dance Officer reported that:

It is generally agreed that the performance work at the 'traditional end' of APD is of mediocre quality. 'Adapted' work is popular but is shallow structurally and thematically and some 'modern work' shows promise is still underdeveloped. There is nothing at the large scale for promoters to programme. This needs to be tackled before huge marketing initiatives pervade venues (2000: 1).

Funding agencies search for dance that they can understand, define and market.

The codes of African dances were, and possibly still remain, largely misunderstood in Britain, hence the perpetual need for definitions about the practice. African dance has not been codified or notated in any formal manner, but its transplantation and continuity, linked to its religious belief systems, have been well established for centuries, through regularity of practice.

While institutionalised racism persists, it seems that for many in Britain 'black' remains a politically resonant and historically significant sign or alliance. Not only is there a stronger sense of recognition of difference within the communities that had elected to identify through the category 'black', but there is an acknowledgement that black may not be the necessary starting point for self-articulation – black may now be seen as one identity category alongside that of artist, or woman, or Muslim, or gay, for example. Alison Donnell has argued that 'black culture is less restrained by the burden of representation' (2002: 6). For those artists who define themselves as Black British (such as Jonzi D and Jackie Guy), there is a sense in which their dance

can refer to a pan-African<sup>51</sup> experience as well as to a contemporary British one.

DeFrantz, drawing on the work of Gilroy, suggests how black dancers performing in the context of the western theatre can draw support from their sense of belonging to the African diaspora. The circle that Gilroy sees as something that 'protects and permits' Black dance in a social context is extended through space and time to the theatrical context:

But what of our concert dancer, already removed from the realm of the social by virtue of her interest in focused aesthetic principles adopted from Western ideas? I offer she might, by necessity, align herself with the African diaspora. Here, she will take comfort in the multitudes similarly disenfranchised and deposited in the New and Old Worlds without recourse to a 'real' homeland. The African diaspora is a utopia...a tool for survival. The diaspora closes the circle for the dance across time and space. Through it, we black dancers allow ourselves to collaborate whether we understand each other or not (DeFrantz 2001: 13-4).

Although DeFrantz is discussing the African American circumstance, this can also be applied to the Black British circumstance. Pilkington (2002) has found that resistance to multiple identities can be found amongst ethnic minorities as well as amongst white 'little Englanders'. Thus, it is likely, that artists who are attempting to forge new dance identities that explore their relationship of being both British and part of an African diaspora, can suffer hostility from those who would keep their cultural traditions separate.

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<sup>51</sup> Pan-Africanism was initially an anti-slavery and anti-colonial movement amongst black people of Africa and the Diaspora in the late nineteenth century. It has since developed and the focus changes according to whether the focus is on politics, ideology, organisations or culture. Pan-Africanism today is seen much more as a cultural and social philosophy than the politically driven movement of the past.

ACE's London Office's figures for 2003/6 (Arts Council of England, July 2003) show the companies receiving the largest shares of the public purse are still the established ballet companies, presenting the dominant form of (western) theatre dance, albeit one that is globally popular. In Britain, while the numbers of black dancers in ballet companies seems to be increasing, there may still be those who fear that audiences will judge what appears to them as a diverse corps as inferior to one incorporating less perceived difference. Dancers whose features would be interpreted as revealing a strongly 'African' ethnicity still seem relatively underrepresented in the marketing of ballet companies and their work (especially amongst the women). This can result in a situation in which the presence of the occasional black ballet dancer tends to stand out since, given current sensitivities to issues surrounding ethnicity, their presence could be perceived as emphasising their difference. When black dancers perform styles such as Ballet, they stand a better chance of being assimilated into English society, which can be viewed positively or negatively. For instance, Jonzi D responded to learning ballet at London School of Contemporary Dance with a sense of being 'colonised' (2001: 4).

Thus, any argument for the persistent use of 'Black dance' as a term, requires that a cohesive and explanatory definition accompany it. Carole Y. Johnson has argued that:

'Black dance' must be thought of from the broadest point that must be used to include any form of dance and any style that a Black person chooses to work within. It includes the concept that all Black dance artists will use their talents to explore all known, as well as to invent new forms, styles and ways of expression through movement. The term demands that within a particular

style, the dancer will constantly strive for higher levels of artistic consciousness and will communicate the truths he finds in his personal search with the people of the community who also share in his artistic involvement (1971: 1).

Johnson works to define Black dance, as first and foremost, movement that is not limited to any one particular technique, vocabulary or style. In this sense, Black dance reflects the varied movement vocabularies developed and articulated through Black dancing bodies, not just the movement idioms that are generally understood to originate in Black African culture. Johnson's assertion suggests that even the varied cultural influences that Black people have assimilated which reveal themselves in movement can be understood as Black dance because they are filtered and distilled through the varied particular and specific racialised experiences of Black people through the use of their bodies. This radically inclusive perspective suggests that there is no one single Black experience to be articulated through a set of specific movement vocabularies, but Black dance becomes a category that encompasses the many dance forms that originate in, are filtered through and arise out of Black people's dancing bodies in concert, social and other contexts. This understanding of the term 'Black dance' ensures that the lives, thoughts, feelings and experiences of Black people, articulated through dance as the chosen medium, continue to find voice, expression, respect and recognition.

### **Characteristics and Aesthetics**

Hilary Carty (independent consultant specialising in leadership, strategic management and organisational development) has argued that for a dance form to

have longevity it must be capable of being codified through a language or vocabulary of movement that conforms to a known aesthetic (2007). There is a clear genre of movements that are associated with and common in African dance forms, so although there is a lot of diversity within the British dance scene (African/Jamaican/Caribbean based work) there is an aesthetic vocabulary that is easily identifiable:

Particularly with reference to this context of 'black dance', aesthetics formulated in reaction to frozen hegemonies instead of working through resistances, remain caught up in the Americanisation of difference (often passing as 'community-based work') underlying melting-pot cultural policies' (Chatterjee 2004: 164-5).

There are Africanist ways of moving body parts such as the feet, buttocks and belly, as well as Africanist characteristics such as skin colour, hair texture and facial features which are deemed 'bad', aesthetically unpleasing and/or inferior<sup>52</sup>. However, these features and attributes have shaped black survival and black cultures, compelling black people to transform the 'bad' into something that is 'cool' to revise the negative into a positive. J. H. Kwabena Niketia (Ghanaian ethnomusicologist, composer and founding director of the International Centre for

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<sup>52</sup> For example, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach divided the human species into five races in 1779, listing the 'races' in a hierarchic order of physical similarities: Caucasian, followed by Americans (Amerindian), followed by Mongolian, followed by Malayan, followed by Africoid peoples. Racial classification according to skin colour became more complex when anthropologists added other, less obvious characteristics, in their attempt to achieve a scientific classification of races. The Martinique-born French Frantz Fanon (1986) and African-American writers Langston Hughes (see Rampersad 2002), Maya Angelou (1984), and Ralph Ellison (1965), amongst others, wrote that negative symbolisms surrounding the word "black" outnumber positive ones. They argued that the good vs. bad dualism associated with white and black unconsciously frame prejudiced colloquialisms.

African Music and Dance) provides an insight into the communicative aspects of African dance forms arguing that:

The dance can also be used as a social and artistic medium of communication. It can also convey thoughts or matters of personal or social importance through the choice of the movements, postures or facial expressions. Through the dance, individuals and social groups can show their reactions to attitudes of hostility or cooperation and friendship held by others towards them. They can offer respects to their superiors, or appreciation and gratitude to well-wishers and benefactors. They can react to the presence of rivals, affirm their status to servants, subjects, and others, or express their beliefs, through the choice of appropriate dance vocabulary or symbolic gestures (1986: 207-8).

Between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the British misunderstood African forms and reported on those in derogatory terms. With other European nations, they projected Africans as 'savages' without any cultural traditions and consistently devalued traditional African religions and dances. This has seeped into the psychology of the British mentality and specifically, may have negatively affected the development of African Dance in the UK. Dance within African societies satisfies a purpose, which communicates and provides specific meaning to its dancers, musicians and audiences, as well as satisfying a wide range of emotional needs. It is governed by specific rules 'but not so rigidly defined so as to remain static in the face of environmental changes' (Ramdhanie 2005: 68). Though not notated, the movements in African dance are codified so that they can convey special messages within their societies and to others who seek to understand.

Repetition in African-derived performances intensifies bodily statements. Repeated dance sequences are contrasted with improvised movements, alternate timing, or developed sections. From a dance perspective, a shared movement vocabulary, belief in contact with the spirit world through dance, music and transcendence, and respect for African ancestors, elders, or the dead were the most important shared values. For example, Robert Thompson's synesthesia, Gottschild's premises and Kariamu Welsh-Asante's foundational principles of African movement emphasise the importance of the spiritual dimension as a prominent characteristic within African and Diaspora dance practices, called ancestorism, 'luminosity', 'coolness' and spirituality. As African dance developed and moved across continents due to migration, audiences and writers dismissed the forms due to misunderstanding, for example, Welsh-Asante reported from her work on dances in Zimbabwe, 'in decoding the dances of Africa in order to read the "text", one must be very careful not to confuse the process of decoding with the process of interpretation' (Welsh-Asante 2000: 90). African dances are both kinetic and cerebral, containing 'meaning beyond the formal, aesthetic shapes and sequences of movement detailed by the body in motion...[and] perform[ing] the actions they name' (DeFrantz 2004: 66).

Carlyle Fielding Stewart has defined spirituality as representing the 'full matrix of beliefs, power, values and behaviours that shape people's consciousness, understanding and capacity of themselves in relation to divine reality' (1998: 1) and this spirituality has become the cornerstone for the survival and development of African dance in contemporary Britain. Currently, many Africans in the diaspora are adopting a lifestyle that reflects the cultural traditions of the continent. There is a noticeable increase in the traditional religious practices of Africa and a new assertion



of spirituality that is directly nurtured through the increased amounts of 'places of worship', the formal and informal networks of cultural associations and the social spaces providing traditional entertainment by Africans.

The postmodern in relation to 'Black dance' is often characterised by the recognition of the continuity-yet-rupture, the marking of difference between the diasporic cultural formations and aesthetics, images of 'tradition', and of the negotiations that mark the reconstitution of blackness as a vital if shifting signifier. In resisting categorisation and labels due to racialisation, there is an issue about denying heritage:

When I hear choreographers say 'I'm a choreographer who happens to be a Black person' I understand what they are saying, but it's an unfortunate choice of words. Something about the statement is very painful because what I hear them buying into is, 'Yes, I see Black as limited, too, so I don't want to be defined by that, 'rather than saying, 'I am African or Black American choreographer, and I choose to work with this aesthetic, or I choose to work in a culturally specific aesthetic based on growing up as an African or Black American person and everything that means'. It doesn't mean any limitations. It hurts me to hear people say 'I'm colourless'...We are artists; we are working with an art form that are passionate about; and we are bringing all of who we are into that art (Zollar in Osumare & Lewis-Ferguson 1991: 79).

British artists like Lawal, resist the conflation of blackness with 'tradition' and the reading of blackness as restrictive and limiting, and instead mobilise the category as an intervention and a critique of the projected 'universality' of Euro-American modes. As Thea Barnes (in ADAD 2007: 155) has argued, it is necessary to consider and acknowledge the difference in 'Blackness' in all its manifestations. Difference can be found in the historical, social, political, climatic and cultural situation of each dance practice as it is embodied and understood.

## **‘Black’ social forms and Hip Hop**

Hylton uses Hip Hop within his dance work and Phoenix and Lawal reference other Black social dance forms within their work. Black social dance forms (such as the Swing, Lindy Hop and the Cakewalk) are constructions of outwardly entertaining and secretly derisive rhetoric, as has been articulated by cultural theorists such as W. E. B. DuBois; DuBois’ theory of ‘double consciousness’ is defined as ‘two souls, two thoughts, two reconciled strivings...in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder’ (1961: 3). This suggests a doubling of desire contained by the tenacity of the black body and released in dance. Black forms have held sway in defining white popular entertainment since the nineteenth-century Broadway and night-club periods through millennial entertainment such as MTV and the live mega-shows of pop recording artists. Gottschild has written that:

In the popular arena, black dances, separated from black bodies become the means of production for distilled white versions – modesty-modified limitations – that meet an acceptable standard before they can be integrated into the white mainstream...whites have the privilege of approaching black cultural goods and tailoring them to their culture-specific needs (2003: 104).

Passed from generation to generation, hip hop retains nuances in movement that distinguish it from other dance forms even if this disparity confirms similar origins.

From the beginning, Caribbean influences shaped hip hop dance. Latin-American musical styles, Caribbean rhythms and African Diaspora dance forms gained new

elements from US Puerto Rican and African American enclaves. Technology spread the dance across the states to the Caribbean, throughout North America, Europe and eventually to Central and South America, Africa, South and East Asia, Australia and the Pacific Islands. An evolved genre had emerged from US barrios and ghettos that were in tandem with its related predecessors, especially Trinidadian calypso and Cuban rumba (see Daniel 2011). All dance elements exploded with tremendous influence on both native and non-native audiences from Denmark and Germany to Japan, Hawaii and England, as well as throughout the Caribbean and the Diaspora US (see Torp 1986, Hesmondhalgh and Melville 2002, Condry 2006, Kato 2007, Osumare 2007). Hip hop and other creations like b-boying/break dancing, popping, locking, freestyle, krumping, clowning, kwassa-kwassa, pantsula, kwaito and many others, are often seen as the debasing of a 'purer' form. However, these dance styles are just the modernisation of older dance forms to evolve in the same way that cultures evolve.

Although hip hop's roots originate in social dance and culture embodied knowledge of the form, with its particular aesthetic, bodily architecture and dynamics having survived and developed after being passed from generation to generation (see Hazzard-Donald 1996, DeFrantz 2004b). Much like some other dance forms, it grew from a self expression of everyday life, 'self-expression, earning respect, and originality were key elements of hip hop culture which appealed to the otherwise socially and materially disenfranchised youth of New York City' (Green and Brammall 2003: 12). Unfortunately, as was highlighted in the introduction, there are a hierarchy of dance styles, with ballet at the top and social, cultural and popular forms (such as hip hop) falling outside of the dominant discourse. This stance, compounded with the

social politics affecting African culture and people from the Diaspora over the last 50 years, left the developmental stages of hip hop overlooked. Mohanalakshmi Rajakumar (2012) has argued that when discussing hip hop dance and culture there needs to be a distinction between the origins of the movement, prior to the media attention and involvement (1970-1990) and after the media exposure and interest from the recording industry.

Historian Robert Hinton assumes that the dual audience for dancing black bodies stems from the construction of slave society (which is applicable since it transcends into the way that black dancing bodies are viewed now):

Early in the slavery experience, Afro-American dance split into two basic streams. The first stream was the dance that black folk created for themselves during those few precious hours of sacred and secular celebration. This first stream was the more 'African', in part because of the movement quality and vocabulary, but also, because the dance was created for white people. This second stream was more 'European', both because of the technique and because the dance was created under differing degrees of duress for the pleasure of the audience. The experience of the performer was secondary (1988: 4).

Thus, the audience for the second stream are privileged, but 'culturally illiterate'.

According to Hinton, the two streams do not meet until after the renaissance of African consciousness, which occurred during the pan-Africanist movement between the two world wars. Although audiences viewing hip hop dance forms may still misread movements of personal transcendence as erotic or simply sensational, the obvious presence of physical pleasure, bound up with a racialised cultural history makes the dance powerfully compelling. Thus, hip hop is an amalgamation of

pleasure and critique. Judgements about popular dance practice, which is a 'product' of popular culture, are not concerned with questions of cultural or aesthetic value. These judgements should be interested in power and the concept of the popular challenges not only the distinctions between high and low culture, but also the very act of cultural classification by and through power (Hall 1996).

DeFrantz has argued that the progressive power inherent in hip hop is most apparent in the 'aggressively layered, dynamic array of shapes assumed by the dancing body' (2004: 71). There is an obvious assertion of power in the angular lines and the rhythmic virtuosity, which is also an indicator of the popularity of the form. When one watches Hylton dancing (whose work incorporates hip hop, theatre, film and contemporary dance choreography), his display of weight suggests a bodily narrative familiar with ballet and contemporary dance, with recognisable lines and movements such as pliés which illustrate his other dance experiences. There is of course, an improvisational nature to his work, which allows for his individual bodily knowledge to come through. It is also necessary to consider though, that hip hop dances are fundamentally concerned with controlling the body, holding it taut and ready for action, making it 'explode' in a fragmented manner that echoes the sampled layering of hip hop music. Hip hop's unique quality comes from its palpable projection of physical dynamism. Without the consideration for the inherent components, the historical development and/or the spiritual vocabulary that inspires the movement, it is easy to be influenced by hip hop's rise in popularity. Tricia Rose writes that:

For many cultural critics, once a black cultural practice takes a prominent place inside the commodity system, it is no longer considered a black practice whose black cultural priorities and distinctively black approaches are either taken for granted as a 'point of origin', an isolated 'technique', or rendered invisible (1994: 83).

Barnes has argued that, in Britain, ambivalence has 'glorified exoticness and mystified performative practices while denigrating indigenous origins' (2007: 156).

These strategies have succeeded in erasing cultural specificity by discarding origins (see Gottschild (2005) for an account of the incorporation of black dance into the mainstream without recognition).

Stereotypical responses about black dance include the notion that black bodies have an innate sense of rhythm and ability to emot[e] emotion and soul. This, of course, is not the case, and even in a form as fluid as hip hop, it has inherent values and requires training. As has been argued previously, cultural dance forms deserve greater recognition and understanding than what is currently seen. The US hip hop choreographer Rennie Harris argues that:

Black culture always gets kicked into...being entertainment. It's approached as a commodity, without understanding the history. People forget that the true foundations of hip hop are an extension of traditional culture in the United States. It comes out of socialising within the community, like everything else. It's about being raw, never slick (Harris in Hutera 2007: 113).

Carla Huntington (2007) has argued that hip hop, like other forms of dance, has become essentialised, and is not a naturally black thing, but came to pass as a result

of certain processes. These processes include body writing (borrowing Susan Leigh Foster's concept) about socioeconomics and politics, reading the reflections and projections of images of people on and off of each other, and documents of historical interactions (ibid: 25). Borrowing from the ethnographer Adrienne Kaeppler (1972), Huntington argues further that hip hop can be classified as a form that was created by African Americans who knew how to operate in a society that was fraught with double meanings and significations, but nevertheless could 'write documents' with their bodies using a language that was accessible to those who spoke it. In this instance, interpretations provided daily ways of being, knowledge of what to do and theories about the world. Hip hop dance that emerged later was a dance form stolen by others for entertainment value only. It is said to have re-emerged within particular societies under the pressure of capitalism and globalisation, as a form that can articulate issues (Huntington 2007: 25-6). It follows then that hip hop dance can be read as a form that is inherently 'black', which exists and is developed parallel to, and in opposition to existing domination, which offers agency to black performers of hip hop dance. The diversification of hip hop dance into an industry is a result of the maturation of the cultural form after more than two decades of growing from the local to the national, to the transnational. Thus, like the other cultural dance forms analysed in other chapters, it would be a supposition that these forms also speak in a particular way for particular reasons. Since part of the hip hop dance tradition has become the incorporation of movements from other contexts to develop an individual style, hip hop dancers seem to be particularly open to borrowing movements from other genres as long as they can incorporate them on their own terms. These dance values seem to parallel a broader concern for equality. This is not to say that 'anything goes'. With a tradition such as hip hop dance with battles and competitions,

judgements are certainly made that decide one dance/dancer is better than another. Hip hop dancers seem to view their practice as linked to an urban youth culture that, while being part of a global phenomenon, also draws on culture and dance traditions specific to a locality. In the mainstream, hip hop dance may be synonymous with the American hip hop dance form, but London based dancers are aware of British traditions and the strengths of dancers around the world in a way in which young jazz dancers in the 1970s could have imagined.

In recent years, hip hop culture's materialism has dominated its reception in the public sphere. Hip hop is, however, no longer a counter-hegemonic definitive of a subversive youth subculture<sup>53</sup>, but has been commodified by the dominant culture. As Rose notes 'for many cultural critics, once a black cultural practice takes a prominent place inside the commodity system, it is no longer considered a black practice – it is instead a “popular” practice' (Rose 1994: 83). As such, hip hop dance is currently commonly presented as theatre dance, on a stage, in the same way as classical ballet is commonly presented. Hip hop is no longer a subculture – it has in many respects become normative despite trying to maintain its subversive status.

Hip hop dance, at least in its urban form, highlights subversion and individuality. Of course, as it has been absorbed into theatre dance, the aesthetic of hip hop dance is

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<sup>53</sup> I realise that Dick Hebdige's (1979) book *Hiding in the Light* is rather old and was written at a time when subcultures were clearly visible as he was concerned with the issues raised by punk rock, but for example, Newburn (2013) argues that the emergence of subculture is not just to respond to human material conditions, but far beyond that, they also represent a symbolic appraisal of the parent culture in which 'style' was considered a form of resistance. Since the 1990s, the term subculture has been used to explain any group of people who adjust to norms of behaviour, values, beliefs, consumption patterns, and lifestyle choices that are distinct from those of the mainstream culture (Cutler 2006). Subcultures share elements of the main culture, while at the same time are different from it (Brake 1985: 6).



evolving and moving, closer to that of institutionalised, Western forms of dance such as classical ballet, but as is pointed out by Harris, this is not a uniform or predictable process:

Hip hop is about being raw, never about being slick. People are missing the point in approaching it with a ballet aesthetic. Even though the show is heavily choreographed, there's improvisation. Everybody is not doing the movement the same way. It doesn't matter if the arms are lifted to the same height, or the weight distributed the same way, as long as they're moving together in synchronised timing (Harris in Hutera 2006, n.p).

Harris' comment clearly imparts the importance of the resistance of hip hop artists to the homogenising influences of the theatre dance scene, as well as reminding audiences that dance can challenge, provoke, reinforce, as well as be appropriated in the pursuit of identity. Further, DeFrantz has argued that the progressive power inherent in hip hop is most apparent in the 'aggressively layered, dynamic array of shapes assumed by the dancing body' (2004: 71). There is an obvious assertion in the angular lines seen in hip hop and in its rhythmic virtuosity.

### **The development of work by British based dancers who are Black**

The term 'Black dance' has a problematic history of use which this chapter seeks to illuminate: that of British funding and artistic exchange between Britain, Africa, the Caribbean and America. This has been further complicated due to the migration of Black people to Britain and the response of the British public to this. This all has had an effect on the kind of work and the development of work produced by British based dancers who are Black. The geographical relocation of African people was driven

primarily by the slave trade, and later by post World War 2 migration; the Empire Windrush arrived in Tilbury on 22 June 1948, carrying 493 passengers from Jamaica wishing to start a new life in Britain. Their sense of patriotism, coupled with the need to work, steered them towards the UK. Despite an apparent official reluctance to allow immigration from the fast-disappearing empire, the government could not recruit enough people from Europe and turned to theme men. Black workers from the Caribbean were joined by those escaping dictatorships in Africa. As a result of these movements, African heritage has become integrated with new cultures, peoples and traditions. One relatively overlooked site for this cultural intervention is the UK. Rozelle Kane (2009) has argued that there are literally hundreds of Samba and African drumming bands and amateur groups in the UK, which makes for a very exciting dance scene, but these activities remain at the fringes of mainstream society.

Post World War 2 there were many trailblazers who paved the way for work of African/Caribbean heritage (see Badejo (1993), Henshaw (1991), Donnell (2002)). Les Ballet Nègres were considered Britain's first black dance company and made their debut in 1946, and for the following seven years toured the opera houses and theatres of UK and Europe. Their founder, Berto Pasuka was born in Jamaica and learnt dancing from the Moroccan people, descendents of runaway slaves. The company included British born black dancers, white British dancers, a Canadian, three Nigerians, a Trinidadian, a German, a Guyanese, two Jamaicans and a Ghanaian. The five drummers were Nigerian. Despite these headline tours the company gets barely a footnote in British dance history. According to Keith Watson, the company drew inspiration from Afro-Caribbean folk tales and rituals 'bringing

dance out of their own cultural background, labelling it “ballet” as little more than a flag of convenience’ (1999, n.p). Audiences were attracted to their rhythmic dynamism, as opposed to European formalism. The company finished in 1953 as they were unable to gain official subsidy. Without subsidy or capital, it was impossible to maintain the dancers and create new works from box office takings alone.

From the 1950s through to the 1970s, black dance faced a period of stunted development. During the 1950s, British ballet found a renewed popularity with Margot Fonteyn and Michel Somes becoming arguably the most famous ballet partnership of the decade, stars of the Royal Ballet and dancing with companies from around the world, and the Sadler’s Wells Ballet achieving international fame, first in Europe and then in America, before becoming the Royal Ballet in 1957. Although the Royal Ballet repertory included the major classical ballets and important revivals from the Diaghilev Ballet repertory, the company also developed a new generation of choreographers who included Robert Helpmann, John Cranko and Kenneth MacMillan. By the end of the 1960s too, contemporary dance was also starting to develop with the foundation of a professional contemporary dance tradition (see Jordan 2003); this tradition took as its model the style of Martha Graham, and the turning point was the transformation of Ballet Rambert from a classical into a contemporary dance company in 1966 and the founding by philanthropist Robin Howard of the London School of Contemporary Dance (LSCD) and the company London Contemporary Dance Theatre (LCDT) in 1966 and 1967, respectively.

By the 1970s, however, pioneering companies such as Sankofa from Ghana were arriving in the UK. During the 1970s and 80s, the struggle for 'Black' and 'minority' arts began to be fought which resulted in the founding of black arts organisations and arts centres. Spaces such as The Cave and The Drum in Birmingham played an important role in ensuring that Black cultural forms had a place to be represented. The 1980s saw a 'boom' in companies working with African/Caribbean and contemporary work derived from these forms such as Ekome, Kokuma, Irie!, Lancel, Kizzie, Dagarti, Delado, Dance de l'Afrique, Phoenix, Dance Co 7 and Badejo Arts. Some of their performances took place in mainstream venues and festivals. Throughout the 1970s and 80s the work of Black artists and companies was seen as a form of social work rather than artistic work. The legacy of slavery had meant that the dancing of the diaspora had already been experienced as enmeshed in the interrelationships between power, bodily skills and capital. Whether or not this legacy was an influence on attitudes to dance competitions in twentieth century Britain, the immediate social and financial climate in Britain in the 1970s and 80s can be considered as having an impact on the dancing of a young generation of Black British dancers. During the 1980s and 1990s, there was dance making that could be considered 'British Black dance', including Kokuma and MAAS Movers. These dance makers re-imagined the imperial gaze by designing alternative movement vocabularies for diasporic representations which brings to fruition and contradicts British hegemonic perspectives.

The early 1990s brought about a time of recession, with cuts in funding being common place. This meant that artistic criteria was paramount in the discerning of quality for dance. Peter Badejo OBE (one of Nigeria's foremost choreographers, dancers and African performance specialists) summed up his paper 'What is Black Dance?' in 1993:

Within ten years of the companies performing African People's Dance forms in existence have collapsed – there has been no solid foundation for them to exist on. When funding decisions were based on non-aesthetic criteria, there were numerous companies but they were denied artistic respect. When artistic considerations become the criteria – the base funding was removed and the structure collapsed (1993).

The collapse of the companies was not necessarily just to do with the funding cuts, but also due to internal disagreements caused by ACE policies. The 'non-aesthetic' criteria is significant as 'Black dance' was not funded by Arts Councils or other government funding, but by Manpower Services Committee and social work departments to deal with social problems and issues following racial tensions and race riots (ibid). Since 1984, for the first time, there had been an umbrella organisation to represent the interests of African dance. Bob Ramdhanie was the first director of BDDT, and they were able to develop a national and international programme to support the educational and spiritual needs of their members. In 1993, BDDT ceased to exist because they only focused on African diasporic dance and this excluded black dancers from other fields, such as Phoenix. This meant, though, that the ACE had to determine how to fund the development of Black dance. Peter Badejo argued that there was no such thing as 'Black dance' and the term is actually divisive and counter-productive; the term 'Black' had come to mean a lot of

deprivation and whilst the 'system' finds it comfortable to have a common name for African and Caribbean people, it should not be this way and the category needs to be far more expandable. Badejo has also been adamant about the fact that 'Black' dance requires an infrastructure in which to develop the genre, theoretically as well as practically.

The 1990s saw a substantial continuation of the ethos of Union Dance, whose philosophy was one of multi-racial integration, and who (like Phoenix) rejected classification<sup>54</sup>. A range of new companies were drawing from the unique cultural multiplicity of Black British culture, while the older, 'traditionally' orientated companies, such as Kokuma, applied more contemporary interpretations to their techniques. African and Caribbean dancers and companies were now under greater threat in terms of public subsidy and also finding spaces to produce their work. Many of the African companies were not understanding the shift being made by promoters, venues and funding agencies and thus were not engaged, or being engaged, in the debates about the future of African and Caribbean dance practice in England. There was also a shift during this time period which saw the emphasis change from black dance practice to black people in dance (black dancers who weren't necessarily just interested in African and Caribbean dance forms, but using contemporary and ballet dance styles for example). Urban dance culture of the 1990s found its way into the dance arena in the form of hip hop and street dance. MC and choreopoet Jonzi D pioneered the fusion of street culture and dance theatre with his 1995 production

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<sup>54</sup> South African exponent Corinne Bougaard formed Union in 1984 with the intention of freeing dance theatre from the boundaries of one culture. Within a contemporary dance framework, Bougaard drew on a variety of influences outside European mainstream dance traditions, such as street dance, martial arts and Asian dance, effectively disabling attempts at categorisation.

*Lyrikal Fearta*. He performs with a bigger-than-life persona, but his personal approach (there is a clear sense of 'honesty' in what he tells the audience) to such issues as police brutality, second generation identity conflicts and black-on-black violence struck stylistically and theoretically at the cutting edge of performance art, and was later developed into a larger internationally toured production in 1999, *The Aeroplane Man*. These expressive adventures presented by young black dancers and choreographers in Britain, and the continuing developments that they prefigured, from contemporary African and Caribbean to street and jazz styles, thereby ensuring that the future of black dance in Britain was one of infinite stylistic possibility.

Because of the noticeable shift in emphasis after Badejo's 1993 paper from black dance practice to black people in dance, black dancers, and racially mixed companies working across cultures and ethnicities, were becoming more visible as the members of traditional and contemporary dancers from Africa and the Caribbean were diminishing. The paper 'Time for Change' by Hermin McIntosh (commissioned by ACE in 1999) re-emphasised Badejo's earlier (1993) argument about the lack of infrastructure for the development of black dance. In 2003, Caroline Muraldo stated that the work of practitioners of traditional dance forms from Africa and the African Caribbean in Britain was 'in crisis' (2003: 33), due to the downsizing or closing down of the more renowned and established companies (for example, Adzido ceased to exist) and the lack of administrative and financial assistance to the lesser known and developing companies. The informal, community inspired, spiritual evolution of African dance in British society laid the forms open to misunderstanding, lack of respect, marginalisation and even though the heightened artistic quality and creative contemporary productions, the forms are still perceived as those 'created by others'.

There is also the issue of those dancers who just want to create Contemporary dance but are expected to exemplify black identities. One key funding concern in Britain has been whether there should be more focus on supporting a range of dance forms that emanate from a full range of cultural traditions or on supporting dancers on the basis of their ethnicity. For instance, ADAD is concerned with the support and development of dance forms emanating from the traditions of African diaspora rather than of black artists per se, but one of their Programme Development Managers, Pamela Zigomo, is aware that this perspective is not universally held by all Black British dancers (see Carr 2012).

Whereas the South Asian dance community has become established and there is 'value' bestowed upon it from schools, venues and media, amongst others, the African and Caribbean dance community (and it could be argued the distinctions made between black and white people in general) have been hindered by the Pan-African legacy, which can be seen to minimise the differences between the various peoples of Africa in favour of a generalised 'African' heritage. Although Bharata Natyam and Kathak are the prominent forms of South Asian dance, the regional folk dance forms are also acknowledged and known. The dances of Africa are seen as 'primitive' (Sorell 1967: 3-15) and an homogenous ideal of African dance has been established, due in part to the lack of education regarding African and African Caribbean cultures with particular significance and relevance in regards to community status, religious beliefs and everyday life. Neither does it help that for many African American cultural historians the critical legacy of 'black dance'



encompasses only social dance, which does not give it the status and 'value' it deserves (see DeFrantz 2000). Many black organisations have struggled to develop initiatives in education and archiving because of a lack of a coordinated and coherent archive for Black Dance in the UK. The need for collecting information and documentation about Black people in the British context cannot be overemphasised. 'Funmi Adewole (2007: 15) argues that due to the lack of documented history each generation of Black British artists re-invents the wheel, looking for the African, Caribbean or new Black British aesthetic, from scratch. For example, Lawal is attempting to go a step further in an attempt to find a global aesthetic; he wants to overturn the conflation of blackness with 'tradition' and the reading of blackness as 'restriction'. Instead, a critique of universalism is made.

### **Adzido Dance Pan-African Dance Ensemble**

An examination of Adzido's development will help to demonstrate the shift in African dance making as witnessed in London and New York. Adzido was originally called Adzido Pan-African Dance Ensemble; a British company founded in 1984 by George Dzikunu with the distinction of presenting narrative based, theatricalised 'traditional' West African dance<sup>55</sup>. They were the first black dance company to secure fixed-term funding from ACE and they were Britain's largest and most commercially impressive company specialising in traditional African dance. Dzikunu's mission statement for Adzido was to promote the appreciation, understanding and practice of original African people's dance in Britain and abroad. Adzido began in a time when professionals, teachers, probation officers and social workers joined forces with

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<sup>55</sup> Dzikunu had arrived from Ghana in the 1970s with his group *Sankofa* and having decided to stay in the UK, before joining Steel an' Skin in 1979.

professional performing artists building an African-based dance company of its time. Adzido debuted with a spectacular array of twenty-eight dancers and musicians gathered from a dozen different African countries. Their first short season at Sadler's Wells featured a production entitled *Coming Home*, a linear narrative led by dances from Benin, Nigeria, Uganda and South Africa. The technical quality, the energy of the dancers and the flamboyance of costume and set was rewarded with an electrified response that conformed Adzido as a mainstream national dance outfit on a par with the leading companies in ballet, jazz and contemporary dance.

Adzido's noteworthy accomplishments were the positioning of an Artistic Director from the African continent with a vision to produce the best possible 'large scale' Africanist dance and music that focused on original material (see Henshaw 1991). These presentations were related to the early twentieth century work of Asadata Dafora<sup>56</sup> and Olatunji<sup>57</sup> in the USA, but Adzido's focus on large scale productions meant that after Les Ballets Nègres, this company was only the second African or Caribbean dance company to produce work for large venues in the UK. They were also related to the more personalised choreographies of Germaine Acogny and Zab Maboungou's solo renditions of traditional African dance expressions that circulated at the end of the twentieth century. Adzido, as a repertory company, also had works similar to the musical theatre spectacles of African Foot Print and Umoja!: 'Adzido seeks to promote the richly diverse heritage of all cultural groups of Black Africa by presenting dance, together with music, in forms which both respect and illuminate

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<sup>56</sup> Dafora, considered one of the pioneers of black dance in America, he was one of the first Africans to introduce African drumming music to the US beginning in the 1930s. His artistic endeavours spanned multiple disciplines, but he is best remembered for his work in dance and music.

<sup>57</sup> Olatunji was a Nigerian drummer, bandleader, teacher, who was a tireless ambassador for African music and culture in the US.

traditional values and have relevance in a contemporary multicultural context’  
(Adzido, Promotional Material, 1985: 1 as cited in Ramdhanie 2005: 192).

In the years 2002-2004, Adzido Pan-African Dance Ensemble had a review of its managerial infrastructure, was questioned about its artistic vision, and was made to reflect on the value and worth of its particular aesthetic practices (see Burns and Harrison 2008). This overhaul meant that the artistic director retired, new managerial staff were employed and the company changed their name to Adzido Dance. While this intensive renovation of its operations was going on several in-house presentations by choreographers from America and Africa were given to an invited audience of stakeholders and African dance aficionados in the British dance community to view, experience and offer critical comments. These included Jawole Willa Jo Zollar (Urban Bush Women, USA), Béatrice Kombé (Compagnie Tché Tché, Ivory Coast), Souleymane Badolo (Kongo Ba Téria, Burkina Faso), Gerto Mendez and H Patten of Britain.

This change in emphasis for Adzido meant that the possibilities of its dancers and the ‘character’ of Adzido’s aesthetic for the future were challenged. The company presented two new works in 2004 with choreographers from South Africa; *Footsteps of Africa* by Zenzi Mbuli which was reminiscent of Adzido’s aesthetic past, and *SILK* by Gregory Maqoma. Although *Footsteps* was familiar to the British dance community as ‘African dance’, *SILK* was not ‘recognised’ as representative of ‘African dance’. According to Barnes (2004) post show discussions about these works at the LSO St Lukes City of London Festival Friday 2 July 2004 spoke of

moments within *SILK* that offered inspired insight with its particular use of space and rhythm. This work, though, had various moments and gestures that extended from what is recognised as ‘traditional African dance’ but offered alternative dimensions of that movement vocabulary. While this repertory confirmed that Adzido would maintain its traditional roots, it was also an indication of Adzido taking a contemporaneously eclectic approach to its Africanist dance expression. According to Barnes (2004), some audience members were vilified by this transformation of Adzido’s expression of ‘African dance’.

In April 2005, ACE decided to withdraw its one million pound revenue funding and the company closed its offices and studio. The company had been working with ACE under its recovery programme to rebuild the company’s financial sustainability and re-vitalise their artistic vision, but it was felt that a viable business model could not be found. The company had gained regular funding from ACE since 1991 to support a large full time contract company of dancers and musicians with a remit to tour Britain and abroad. The funding was reallocated towards supporting and developing artists and companies within the African People’s Dance sector (see Okepwho and Nzegwu 2009). From its beginnings, Adzido were positioned in such a way as to ‘water down’ the homogenising and superiority effects of England’s culture canon, but ironically and ultimately the company’s Africanness mitigated its ability to operate beyond its position of Other. It seems that overwhelmingly, African artists seem to be burdened with cultural obligation:

Born out of social benevolence and initiatives to provide British communities with diverse, alternative art presentations, Africanist expressions are used to social reform, education strategies and fortification of identity. These initiatives, though, are not enough to sustain these practices (Barnes 2005, n.p).

There is a continued issue that 'Black' Dance companies are unable to create viable business models to allow them to continually develop and explore their individual artistic aims. Community participation in 'Black dance', although instrumental in developing understanding of the art form, and creating a blue print for participatory and performance workshops still used today, has perhaps also done the sector a disservice in terms of 'respectability' within the funding system, because for a long time the 'African dance' forms were relegated to the community arena (which clearly has much value and worth) but has never afforded the same 'high art' status as ballet and contemporary dance for example.

There is a geographical and shared history for all African dance forms that lead to commonality but there are also the stereotypes and myths, the traditions that make exotic, or denigrate, invisibilise or commodify 'African dance'. Traditional dances satisfy nostalgia recalling the classic forms with raffia, flowing fabrics, drums and the narrative. Those dances were a means to affirm cultural identity by recalling history, portraying life stories, enacting rituals or reclaiming spiritual significance. Whilst those dances have been exemplary, they have also ghettoised dance practice by proclaiming a singular responsibility for what 'African dance' is: they also reinforce a stereotyping that fixed the reality of Africa as a politically and culturally constructed entity distinctly different from anything 'British'; something 'primitive', something

'black', something 'other'. The apprehension of those past dances had positioned 'African dance' outside the British mainstream dance art. 'African dance' seemed appreciated, even desired, in the past, but perhaps was only tolerated by the hierarchy out of some generosity born out of imperialistic arrogance. Cultural relativity also has its own arrogance (since within this perspective there would be no need for, or argument for, social progress – toward what objective goal would we progress?). Both types of arrogance still suppress Adzido Dance's artistic vision to limited aesthetic apprehensions of what 'African dance' is and can be.

### **British based artists who are Black case studies**

It has been highlighted that the dance theatre of British based artists who are Black reflects a variety of artistic lineages which umbrella terms such as 'African peoples' dance' do not fully acknowledge. In Britain, African dance seems to have its own variety of hurdles to jump: its numerous genealogies which provide evidence of hectic growth spurts, then disjuncture satisfying or dissatisfying the cultural and social and/or political needs of its root community, and finally the cultural discourse that marginalises it. The rest of this chapter will see an analysis of some of the same concerns that were analysed in relation to the British Asian case studies in Chapter 3, namely in terms of funding and placement within the mainstream in relation to the work of British based artists who are Black. Other concerns also include the notion that the dancing of 'black people' has occasionally been valued (for example, hip hop dance and other social forms), but frequently it has been scrutinised for signs of inferiority. Dancers who are black have proved that, with equal opportunity, they can excel in whichever dance form they choose; the case studies of Lawal, Hylton and

Phoenix demonstrate this aptly as all utilise different dance styles and do so in a way that critique stereotypical notions of the Black dancing body and dominant discourse. It is only bias, ethnocentricity or racism that has hindered their entry into the mainstream discourse.

As with the British South Asian choreographers analysed, there is also a desire amongst British based artists who are Black to work 'in-between' cultures, to reveal the contradiction and complexity, and the differences that characterise the black communities. These choreographers are attempting to broaden the category of 'Black dance' as it come to be experienced as constrictive and stereotypical. For example, Mercer's discussion of the style politics of black hairdressing exemplify a process of cultural mixing that is fundamental to the development of black diasporic practices and can be applied to the work of the black dance practitioners:

Diaspora practices of black stylisation are intelligible at one 'functional' level as dialogic responses to the racism of the dominant culture, but at another level involve acts of appropriation from the seam 'master' culture through which 'syncretic' forms of cultural expression have evolved (1997: 430).

This notion of 'dialogic response' and of 'appropriation' are key to understanding the work of these three practitioners. Because of these diasporic practices and the interplay between various forms and discourses in black cultural practices, hip hop dance complicates simplistic cultural models that posit authenticity against appropriation, or originality against commercialisation. This is important to the work of Hylton whose allegiance to what he argues is the 'classicism of hip hop' is partly

about resisting the commercialisation of the form, but also suggests that classicism is the master culture that he is appropriating. Artists like Lawal are resisting the conflation of blackness with 'tradition' and the reading of the 'black' category as something that is restrictive and limiting, and instead mobilise blackness as an intervention and a critique of the projected 'universality' of Euro-American modes (which sees the appropriation of the 'master culture'). In the analysis of Phoenix I will examine their use of contemporary dance technique and its intersection with aspects of their 'black culture' together with the treatment of particular themes related to identity and politics. By doing this, I reveal the problematic way they are positioned in the British mainstream dance discourse and their relationship with cultural policy. As was highlighted earlier in this chapter, the dance forms of Africa and the Caribbean are coded forms of communication for the various communities that they belong, and thus, Daniel (2011) warns that viewers and analysts of African dance in the Diaspora need to alternate between sacred and secular lenses to search for core African values and common Diaspora understanding before determining what the dance means.

In the analysis of Lawal, I investigate how he has developed strategies (such as labelling his work as postmodern and developing a 'universal' dance technique) in order to find a space within the mainstream of the British dance discourse and how he uses spirituality in order create work that informs, educates and challenges audiences. In the analysis of Hylton, I investigate his appropriation of classicism and his attempt to educate audiences as to the legacy of hip hop. He does not conform to images of Euro-American modern dance, but is able to critique racial norms through the 'double consciousness' of his work, with those audiences who are versed and



knowledgeable about hip hop understanding or enjoying differently to those audiences who find it aesthetically and virtuosically pleasing.

### **Case Study 1: Phoenix Dance Theatre**

Phoenix have had a diverse history with various Artistic Directors. The company's repertoire and marketing has clearly responded to these changes in leadership and artistic directors. As Christy Adair (2007) has shown, this change in focus, repertoire and marketing has also been a response to the cultural agendas and ACE policies during the company's development. The identity of the company started as intentionally all-black and all-male, before becoming mixed race and mixed gender. The original Phoenix were a company influenced by the Black experience in terms of content, but whose representation of form was strictly in the contemporary dance idiom. There has been a resistive potential to some of the work produced throughout the history of the company. My aim is to examine the way in which the company has utilised contemporary dance techniques in order to position themselves as a mainstream British repertory company (a predominantly white domain), and yet deal with themes that reflect their black subjectivities, multicultural Britain and national identity in order to subvert the cultural policies that have positioned them strictly within a particular frame.

The reading I present is heavily reliant on Adair's *Dancing the Black Question: The Phoenix Dance Company Phenomenon* (2007) which is an account of the cultural history of the company. However, there is more emphasis on choreographic analysis

here, and an inclusion of the work of artistic director Darshan Singh Bhuller who falls outside of the time period covered in Adair's book. It is my intention to investigate the particular way in which the company utilise canonical dance techniques. Through a close reading of their choreography and performance quality, I shall illuminate their resistive potential and their ability to comment (be it consciously or subconsciously) on the cultural policies with which they have to align themselves. The development of Phoenix demonstrates the tension between the requirements of an accountable government body, ACE, and the creative self-management of a group of dancers who want to explore their own artistic interests and to share their skills in educational and community settings.

As Adair's (2007) book argues, the structure of the repertory company (with a board to answer to, various choreographers working with the company, an artistic director and so on) posed difficulties. There was an assumption that artistic excellence would be rewarded and validated by the artistic community, which meant that more and more high profile choreographers were commissioned, but took the 'ownership' away from the founder members and also the question of identity more of a complex negotiation. The question is whether artistic excellence is judged correctly and without cultural baggage. The company's 'black dancing bodies' became an ambiguous, political tool both satisfying and dissatisfying visions they set themselves and those set by others. Artistic practice is inevitably the most important aspect for dance practitioners /companies, but as was highlighted in Chapter 1, art is produced within a social, cultural and economic context and policy shapes this field in which art emerges, or is produced. Therefore, there is a dialogic or iterative process by which policy and practice shape, and are shaped by one another. The key issue is

accountability; when companies are artists receive public funding which they are accountable for, there comes an interaction with policy. Cultural policy forces artists and companies to re-consider, re-prioritise or re-frame their practice. This can also be useful and influence innovative dance practice (as has been the case with Phoenix with different choreographic voices being given the opportunity to create new work) because it embodies the idea of rigorous questioning (it can be argued that this is at the very heart of 'good' practice). There must, however, be clarity and precision in the use of language and terminology. Having explicit statements of policy, and being required to discuss and analyse their meaning, should ensure communication between the different players in the arena (however, the founding members of Phoenix were Black working class dancers who may not have been confident in discussions with, for example, white middle class educated ACE officers).

### **Career and development of work**

Phoenix was founded in 1983 by David Hamilton (Artistic Director), Donald Edwards and Vilmore James. Its members were in their teens when they formed and, although they were skilful performers, they had not received the usual formal three year dance training. The founding members of Phoenix all identified themselves as working class. These perceptions of themselves as working class affected the views of themselves, their work and their audiences. Their local area was Harehills and Chapeltown, Leeds, which was home for most of the African Caribbean community who had migrated to Britain. The area suffered from high unemployment, low incomes, low levels of skills and educational attainment, poor housing, derelict

buildings, a lack of confidence and a fear of crime, and poor public image (Gregg 1998: 1). At the same time, it has 'a strong community spirit and wealth of active community organisations. It has a wide range of cultural and ethnic influences that make it an exciting place to be' (ibid). Carl Hylton suggested that, as with other regions in Britain with a significant African Caribbean population, the Leeds community was dealing with issues of racism and unemployment. Various organisational strategies were devised to deal with these issues, for example, advocacy work in relation to housing, education, health and dealing with the police; providing additional education in the form of Saturday schools; and 'individual and collective approached to Black art forms' (1996: 4). 'Art performs a dual function in our society, that of reflection of what exists, and creates fantasies of what is possible' (Connor in Hylton 1996: 5). Hylton identified black arts expression as concerned with the self-expression of African or African Caribbean community cultures and issues, both past and present. In that sense, he viewed the art work as functional. He quoted David Hamilton, who suggested that contemporary dance, when combined with reggae and jazz as stimulants for creativity, has links with African People's folk traditions. The founders of Phoenix presented a choreography which was infused with Reggae, and informed by their bond as black men and engagement with their communities. They quickly achieved critical acclaim. They appeared to herald a new era at a time of race riots and politicised art.

All of the founder members came from the Harehills educational programme and the community dance movement's use of Laban theories promoted an idea of contemporary dance that was open to cultural influences and which allowed children from differing backgrounds to work together creatively. However, Hamilton (1997)

also suggested in an interview with Adair that the training for ballet and contemporary dance made it difficult for black dancers to express their culture (which is similar to comments made by Jonzi D and Hylton in the next case study)<sup>58</sup>.

Hamilton was highlighting the complexity of dance training and the creation of work for artists who wish to make culturally specific work. These ideas come from both an Afrocentric position and a political perspective that evolved with the Civil Rights Movement in the USA in the 1960s, which have both had an impact on dance.

Phoenix dancers' education had fixed something of a modernist aesthetic that, even though the dancers would draw on the moves they learned in the clubs and in social arenas of the time, these would be at odds with the contemporary aesthetic. There may also have been some suspicion by the original Phoenix dancers of those external agencies attempting to organise cultural activity.

In the early years of Phoenix, an array of art forms and organisations in Leeds were initiated and led by black practitioners:

The Black communities are particularly concerned to affirm their right to define and determine the parameters of quality and the essence of their cultural expressions. The official validation of these expressions will be achieved when the arts funding establishment creates space for Black communities to lead the process of defining, assessing and evaluating their art and the cultural contexts in which they are located (Blackman and Bryan 1991, quoted in Hylton 1996: 12).

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<sup>58</sup> This is a contentious point. Several of the early Phoenix dancers enjoyed the physicality of ballet at the Yorkshire Ballet seminars. Moreover, ballet classes are an accepted part contemporary dance training, and Phoenix have had ballet teachers taking class at different points in the Company's history.

Hylton's description of the arts activities in Chapletown area of Leeds, highlights the need felt by African Caribbean arts practitioners to set up their own structures and to retain control of their work so that they had the means to explore their self-expression.

As was noted earlier in the chapter, for many young Black men during the 1980s, dance became one of the few avenues to prove themselves. As if to embody the spirit of the era, their dancing increased in competitive intensity, which attracted positive attention from a few influential figures in the media, but in more 'conventional' theatre, rather than being celebrated as culture, more often it would be perceived by some as a threat to society (see Carr 2010). Issues of race, class and gender coalesced in a manner that youths, and especially Black, male, working class ones, were often viewed as essentially problematic. It was also noted that the 'status' of Jazz dance and other Black dance forms during the 1980s in comparison to the Contemporary dancers of the time reveals how they embody different values that, drawing on Bourdieu (1979, 1984) are linked to differences in 'habitus'. Much contemporary dance tended to fit into a high modernist or formalist aesthetic which confirmed its status as art in terms of elite tastes while, jazz dancers and dancers of other Black forms brought dancing to the stage, it was not only its popular roots that meant it might struggle to be valued as art. In keeping with the attitudes of theorists such as Theodor Adorno (1981, 1991, who specifically referred to jazz dancing), the competitive nature of jazz dance placed the spectacular physicality of this dancing in opposition to the still dominant modernist aesthetics of much contemporary dance. The aura of calm control in jazz dancing, whatever the complexities of the choreography, is perhaps suggestive of a cultural positioning removed from the

economic and other tensions that affected so much of Britain at this time. Thus, the contemporary dance technique demonstrated by the founding members of Phoenix won them an international audience and, although all of its members were Black, Phoenix categorically rejected being classified as a black dance company. Initially the company mainly performed work in small theatres and community centres, but their 'fresh' approach to contemporary dance soon gained them ACE's support, and acclaim from critics and audiences.

In 1987, Neville Campbell joined Phoenix as Artistic Director. Under Campbell's direction the company included female dancers for the first time and the company increased to ten members. Margaret Morris took over as Artistic Director in 1991. Following Morris, Thea Nerissa Barnes became Artistic Director in 1997 and under her leadership the company aimed to reclaim and preserve the heritage by establishing its first archive. Bhuller took over as Artistic Director in 2002 and rebranded the company. Under his direction, the company moved into larger scale venues and refocused itself as a multi-cultural company. Javier De Frutos became Artistic Director in 2006, and programmed seminal works by American choreographers alongside his own work.

The founders viewed themselves as contemporary dancers but drew, albeit sometimes unconsciously, on their black subjectivities to inform their work. The postmodern innovations of the 1980s disrupted notions of dance virtuosity and meaning, whereas the founders of Phoenix turned back to their personal worlds for choreographic inspiration. The description of a 'black dance company' came from the

press, the funders and the management of the company at specific times in its history. It was probably their high-affect juxtaposition, ephebism, aesthetic of the cool, and the 'human' connection to the audiences which made their work popular and different to mainstream companies. Gottschild has discussed the aesthetic of the 'cool' where the dancer may be executing fast and highly energetic movement, but their face remains 'cool'. Gottschild argues that this rhythm and energy gives African American dancers 'soul' (again, I believe that this can be applied to the work of British based artists who are Black):

For African American performers, soul is the nitty-gritty personification of the energy and force that it takes to be black and survive. Rhythm, and the many textures and meanings implied in the concept (percussive drive, pulse, breath and heartbeat, for example), play a pivotal role in generating and disseminating soul power (2003: 223).

The founder members of Phoenix definitely demonstrated this 'coolness' and confidence. When Phoenix was founded the identification as 'Black British' was significant as it was a time when contemporary dance companies comprised of mainly white female and male dancers in an art form which was associated with femininity (Adair 1992)<sup>59</sup>. The company used the social dances 'from the streets' and clubs of Harehills such as funk, reggae, jazz and Graham based technique inspired by the LCDT visits and Laban based work at school, to combine with a very athletic contemporary dance style. It is also significant that the company identified

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<sup>59</sup> There were, of course, some exceptions to this generalisation, including Robert North's *Troy Game* which was choreographed for LCDT in 1974. Set to Brazilian music, the piece saw the thirteen male dancers in minimal clothing, demonstrating athletic ability, but because of its humour it did not present any obvious male stereotypes. It had 'success' with audiences to the point that in 1976 in Liverpool, the company director, Robert Cohan, arranged for the dancers to rehearse and perform in shows in sports centres and gyms, in an attempt to bring in new audiences.



themselves as working class which affected their views of themselves, their work and their audiences. The location of the company was unusual as they were based in Leeds, in the North of England. The capital city, London, is where most of the big dance companies are based.

In this early period of the company's history, a significant means for artistic director, David Hamilton, in his quest for expression was the use of reggae music as an accompaniment to some of the dance works, notably *Forming of the Phoenix* (1982) (Hamilton in Adair 2007: 64). Gilroy (1993) analyses how reggae music drew together people of the Caribbean who had very different cultural and political histories. The role of reggae music for Hamilton was that it was an important ingredient in his creation of dance works which had cultural significance: 'The interaction of the people makes up the group. Behind that is the core of the idea which is, like the mythical (Phoenix) bird, taking from itself to develop it dies and everything takes place within itself' (Hamilton in Holgate 1997: 5). *Forming of the Phoenix* was also filmed in 1984 for the established arts television programme, *The South Bank Show*. Each dancer introduces themselves to the audience, and their individuality of style and parody is obvious. Their style was described as 'high-spirited, athletic, fast, funny and fantastically dangerous' (King in Adair 2007: 60). One aspect that Phoenix represented on stage and in recordings was that of black masculinity. This was an element of their identity, which they were exploring (not necessarily consciously) and which was read by audiences and critics. In *The South Bank Show* (Evans 1984) the dancers make clear that dancing is a central, integral part of their lives and that they do not separate their club experience from their stage and touring experiences. They enjoy dancing and want to share that with a range of

people through workshops and performances on tour; the link to their community is clear and essential.

At this early stage of the company's development, all the dancers were also choreographers. For example, Edward Lynch choreographed *Nightlife at the Flamingo* (1983) which was set in an imaginary American nightclub in the 1940s. The piece integrates elements of popular culture with contemporary dance. The work was noted as one of the most popular pieces in the early repertoire. It included a fast-paced duet, which bears remarkable resemblance to the work of the Nicholas Brothers, the famous tap duo who blended tap dance with acrobatics whilst demonstrating amazing showmanship which allowed them to work in Hollywood. Lynch's dance is a mixture of lindy hop, tap and modern dance creating intricate rhythms and excitement. These popular art forms were 'created' and associated with African people and heritage. Thus, as Adair notes, on the one hand, Phoenix viewed their source as contemporary dance and wished this to be acknowledged. On the other, they used reggae and aspects of their heritage as their inspiration and source and were deeply connected to their community, which inevitably influenced and played a large part on their work.

A choreographer who made a work for Phoenix, but who had no connection to the company directly, was Jane Dudley, a former dancer of the Martha Graham Dance Company, who also choreographed her own work and was Director of Graham studies at LCDS in 1972. She created *Running* in 1985, but as Merville Jones observed, this was:

[...] one of those pieces that was imposed upon the company. We learnt a lot from Jane – her passion for dance and life. The piece itself was a challenge to do because it was physically demanding, but it was [also] boring (1997, in Adair 2007: 48).

It was important for the company to work with outside teachers and choreographers to develop skills, but the tension was already evident about the importance of also working with people who were perceptive about their shared background and their understanding of dance. Dudley clearly valued the company's work, and was particularly impressed that the company interacted with audiences that had a lack of interest in contemporary dance. However, her comments in *The South Bank Show* made her preconceptions clear, as she stated that it would be a pity if Phoenix became 'too arty, intellectual or formalist' (Evans 1984). Adair (2007) states that there is a subtext that this remark refers not only to ethnicity, but also to class. Art is tended to be associated with the middle class, which is clearly not the background of the company members. Adair suggests that Dudley is potentially making racist remarks by insinuating that people from African Caribbean heritage cannot be 'too intellectual', which harks back to the stereotype of 'black' people being associated with physicality rather than intellect. Dudley further suggested that the company's strengths were better suited to content based pieces rather than to more abstract work. However, the comments do not suggest that the Phoenix dancers are not capable of producing intellectual 'arty work', but that it would be a pity if they did (which implies that they are capable). It seems like Dudley is more concerned with a working class audience struggling with the work (and therefore disengaging). Thus, it needed to be more content based, and if the company became more 'arty', they may

move away from this audience and that is the concern. Obviously the comments are still problematic, but they may reflect opposition to high culture common in the 1980s socialist leaning art, rather than racist to the degree that is suggested by Adair.

At this stage, the company was a small scale company. In 1984, the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB) (as it was then known) granted the company funding, and by doing so ACGB benefitted by being seen to support culturally diverse work as it helped to promote the cultural policies at the time and was able to satisfy its own agenda as stated in *The Glory of the Garden Report* (1984). The report had acknowledged that the arts were under-funded and extra funding was allocated to address the issues highlighted and 'to strengthen the support given to Black and Asian dance' (ACGB 1984: 15). ACGB noted that Phoenix had produced some quality work without regular funding and had developed out of outstanding dance-in-education work by LCDT at Harehills School (ibid: 15). It is clear from the statement about Phoenix in *The Glory of the Garden Report* that the company fulfilled one of the key objectives of the ACGB, which was to give support to what they termed, without definition, 'black dance'. It also allowed ACGB to support work which emerged from the regions. This funding did mean that the company could pay themselves more realistic wages and could operate all year round. It became possible to employ more dancers and to perform and tour to larger venues. There were, however, other consequences, which included the expectation that the company structure should conform with a pre-existing model of professional company management.

Adair has highlighted that, unfortunately, ACE, though imposing this structure, did not put any mechanisms in place to enable the artistic practices of the company to develop and expand. This development meant that the Board became the managers and the artists, therefore, no longer directly managed their work but became employees of the Board. The initial vision and the dance making practices of the founders ceased at this point. The dancers were angry about the effects of this imposed structure and ACE were not sufficiently reflective of their own practices and structures to support the company's choreographic beginnings (see Barnes 2001). Phoenix had no choice but to respond to ACE's financial support in terms of definition: funding brought about obligations (Adair 2007). Phoenix were being 'used' to fill and market the cultural agenda of the time.

Campbell's aim (as Artistic Director 1987-1991) was to establish Phoenix as a successful, middle scale, contemporary dance company without a label such as 'a black dance company' being attached to it. Campbell's ambition was to reach the audiences in the larger venues (see Adair 2007). His approach to dance was influenced by his training at LCDS and he developed the technical proficiency of the company. Further, differences between Hamilton's and Campbell's choreography were identified in an interview with Campbell, conducted by Ramsay Burt in 1989. The early work tended to be constructed around the dancers' physical qualities and incorporated their dynamism and vigour, and Hamilton conveyed the 'emotions of the people performing' (in Holgate 1997: 7). This style was modified, with Campbell's arrival to express political and social issues of contemporary relevance. Campbell also brought in some white choreographers, including Michael Clark and Aletta Collins. The company gained more mainstream recognition, but tensions over its

identity continued to 'simmer'. In a 1990 review Judith Mackrell outlined that some of the key issues facing Phoenix (within the context of British dance in the 1990s) was that the controversy raised by positive discrimination policies, through which many black dancers were seen to be 'patronised' and 'trapped' by a set of unwanted expectations. She suggested that Phoenix was:

A model minorities dance group – its memberships exclusively male, working-class and black [presenting work that] conformed to a very black and very street-cred image, with an up-tempo jazzy style and heavy use of blues and reggae music. To some they were a flagship modern dance company (1990, n.p).

Adair argues that it was during Morris' directorship that there was overt acknowledgement of what was recorded in Company notes as the 'Black British experience' (2 March 1992: 2) even though Morris was building on the international success of the company too. Undoubtedly, this was partly because of the pressure she was under, from funders, critics, audiences and the board, to justify her position as a white director who was also female and whose professional dance experience was primarily teaching in schools and colleges across the US, Canada and Europe. Through her teaching, she was committed to developing the individual dancer into a versatile and intelligent professional, not limited to one style or technique. She was the exact opposite of what the company was famous for, that is, black and male, which created identity problems which she had to unravel and attempt to solve. Thus, Morris' position was a difficult one, not least because some of the dancers in 1991 wanted an all black company (for artistic reasons so as to be working with people like themselves). Although the Black Arts movement of the 1980s no longer

had the same impact, there were legacies of those philosophies that leaked into expectations of the company. Morris was attempting to lead a contemporary dance company without ignoring the political tensions of their perceived identity as a 'black dance company'. In 1992, the company felt the need to review and reflect on their achievements and future direction. Adair states that the business plan (30 October 1992) identified the policy tensions eleven years after the creation of the company. It pointed out that there were conflicting expectations from stakeholders. These policy tensions (1992: 3) were noted as:

- Autocratic vs. Democratic management
- Black vs. Multicultural company
- Mainstream vs. Linked to the community
- Small Scale vs. Middle Scale
- National vs. International

As Adair points out the dilemma for the company of trying to stay true to their roots and being funded and 'pushed' in another direction was complex. It alludes to notions of essentialism and authenticity that have haunted the company. Desires for representations, authenticity and the 'Other' are constructed and contested among different reading publics. Hall offers a model of the production of identities which 'denies the existence of authentic and originary identities based on a universally shared origin or experience. Identities are always relational and incomplete in process' (Hall and du Gay 1996: 89). The marketing of the company, the demands placed on the board, dancers and artistic directors, and audience reception determine the reception and reading of the company's work. Institutionalised discourses of diversity paradoxically reinforce the neutrality of whiteness: the strange contradiction inherent in multiculturalist ideology is that the efforts and initiatives

towards racial and ethnic diversification in cultural publics risk reaffirming the dominance and 'benevolence' of the white gaze.

The use of contemporary dance technique has been a constant in Phoenix's work, despite its various artistic directors and varied history. This has meant a use of a white mainstream 'monolithic' dance training. For example, there have been many dancers in the company that had attended LSCD (and more recently NSCD). This use of mainstream techniques promotes a rigid conception of the 'dancerly body', which limits the possibility for individuality (even though there are many contemporary companies today, including Mark Morris, that include dancers of all sizes, the 'tradition' of the slender, supple body type within ballet continues to be the norm and dance, like sport, has reached a pitch of technical expertise that requires the most finely tuned of physical instruments). So, 'dancerly' bodies are loaded with issues such as weight and/or height particulars (see Gottschild 2005). This limits the range and diversity of movement vocabularies available to 'different' bodies<sup>60</sup>.

Further, Gottschild (2003) has suggested that there is now more familiarity with the concept that the 'black dancing body' dancing a range of material and if we borrow from DeFrantz (2001) who insists upon the existence of a 'core black culture' that embraces the idioms of black expressive culture, these elements of Phoenix's works are clearly identifiable (the use of culturally specific music, rap, fashion, African dance forms and so on) and help to construct their own black identity. However, because Phoenix utilise contemporary dance technique and have an interest in

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<sup>60</sup> In tango and flamenco, many African forms, belly dancing, classical Indian dance, it is often the larger performers who hold our attention. Their bodies seem to have a sensuality and carry a weight of history and experience. But this kind of body is unlikely to appear in a professional ballet company, for example, it was only in February 2014 that Channel 4 showed *Big Ballet* in which eighteen generously proportioned amateurs trained to perform a version of *Swan Lake*.



focused aesthetic principals adopted from Western ideals they are making explicit the hidden links between blacks and ground an oppositional aesthetic constituted around the difference from 'white' ideals of beauty and can be seen as 'remaking' contemporary dance for their own use. This could account for the uneasiness and misunderstanding of Barnes' decision to re-present work from the past company repertoire under her directorship which demonstrated the diversity of dance styles included, because audiences and critics were measuring the work against Western conceptions of dance.

### **Key issues and themes**

The audiences for art forms such as dance are mainly from professional and managerial classes and most have received further education (Lewis 1990). Linda Jasper and Jeanette Siddall have noted that audiences for dance are usually white and aged between twenty-five and forty-four (1999). These factors are relevant to the development of Phoenix because the founders, as working-class young men from the African diaspora practicing contemporary dance, are potentially disadvantaged in relation to audiences that 'tend[ed] to be white' (Lewis 1990: 16).

Lewis states:

It is difficult to tell how much this is simply due to the disadvantaged position of black people in social class and educational terms. Do black people abstain from arts attendance because they tend to be working class or because of the dominance of white cultural forms? (ibid: 17).

Phoenix's allegiance to contemporary dance was further explored under Bhuller's leadership when he took over as Artistic Director in 2002 until 2006. The 'identity' issue was sidelined and Phoenix Dance Theatre (as he renamed it) became a repertory company with a top-notch roster of international dancers. Bhuller is credited with turning round the company's fortunes. Bhuller was brought from Talvindi, an impoverished Punjabi border village, at the age of six to Chapleton, Leeds, then one of Britain's most deprived inner-city areas, so as Adair points out he shares the 'working class' identity with the founding members of Phoenix. Bhuller will have been able to identify with the tensions and questions that Phoenix must have faced throughout the development of the company; between attempting to find 'success' and find a 'space' amongst the mainstream contemporary repertory companies and keeping a connection with their community and roots, but crucially, is not directly in touch with Africanist aesthetic forms. Bhuller remembers of his childhood:

My dad came over first in 1964 to work in Leeds on the railways for a couple of years before bringing Ma and me over from India. He then worked for twenty years on building sites and though he hardly ever spoke about racial abuse, I know he suffered immensely (Bhuller in Taylor 2003, n.p).

Bhuller was among the first cohort of Harehills pupils to be taught by Nadine Senior. He attributes his love of narrative and his own preference for dance drama rather than conceptual or abstract pieces to her influence: 'In many ways my work has gone back to my roots at Harehills. We were constantly making up movements that came from our own experiences' (Bhuller in TES 2002). After Harehills, Bhuller went on to complete his full time training at the LCDT from 1979 to 1994, first as a dancer,

then as rehearsal director, choreographer and teacher. As a dance student in London, Bhuller was regularly spat at and called a 'Wog' and worse, when out walking with white girlfriends, eventually being badly beaten by a roving pack of 'Paki-bashers' near Kings Cross station: 'I was grateful the only weapons they had were their boots' (ibid). His experiences have fed into some of his more socially and politically probing work.

A difficulty in considering the issue of class is that there are scholars who assert that 'class as a concept is ceasing to do any useful work in sociology' (Pahl 1989) or even proclaim 'the death of class' (for example, Pakulski and Waters 1996; Holton and Turner 1989). Yet, there are also titles such as *Bringing Class Back In* (McNall, Levine and Fantasia 1991), *Reworking Class* (Hall 1997), *Repositioning Class* (Marshall 1997) and *Class Counts* (Wright 1997). Ron Ramdin's study *The Making of the Black Working Class in Britain* (1987) offers a thorough background of the factors contributing to class positions in Britain of those from the African diaspora: 'As part of the black working class, they were alienated, the direct result of the precise and cumulative effect of British policy-makers. Black youths understood through hard experience that colour was the major determination of their alienation' (1987: 458). This was the context in which the founders of Phoenix started the company; being young working class men, there were low expectations concerning their abilities and few choices open to them for employment. Their success, therefore, was particularly impressive. Bhuller too, despite his background, managed to secure a place at LCDT at the age of 15 (which meant that he had the formal three year dance training that the founder members of Phoenix did not) and continued as a successful performer, choreographer and teacher. However, while they all identified themselves as working

class, such identification was problematic. As Ramdin points out the inclusion into the British working classes of the new migrants and their descendents was fraught with tension, and a lot of the emigrants from Jamaica, Caribbean and Africa in the 1940s and 50s were middle class in the Caribbean but forced to take menial jobs in the UK.

Phoenix experienced a number of difficulties which resulted in its closure for a number of months in 2001. Bhuller was appointed Artistic Director of Phoenix in February 2002, after ACE decided that it did not want a northern repertory company to close. When Bhuller first became Artistic Director of the company, he noted that:

What I'm looking for is a diverse modern dance repertory company. That doesn't mean that we'll bring in Indian or African dance. But we might choose choreographers who have a source in it. What interests me is only that we're all trained in modern dance. I think that may be quite difficult for some people because we did once have such a strong black identity (Bhuller in Swift 2003: 65-6).

Like Campbell and Barnes before him, he wanted a more flexible image of the company, not one fixed by ethnicity; this was probably a strategy for ensuring that the company remained as part of the mainstream contemporary dance canon.

As Bhuller has become more established as a choreographer, he has become more confident about tackling controversial issues in his choreography, for example, in 2003, Bhuller choreographed a piece called *Requiem* which was based on the

'Soham murders' that occurred in 2002; two ten year old girls called Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman were murdered by the local school caretaker in the village of Soham, Cambridgeshire. Bhuller said in an interview with Judith Mackrell that the piece was going to be very demanding of its audience; 'it may be especially troubling for Phoenix's regular audience, since the company has, historically, been known as one of Britain's most high energy, feel-good dance groups' (Bhuller in Mackrell 2003, n.p). *Planted Seeds* (2003) was another particularly dark piece which opened with snapshots of apparently normal life in Sarajevo with children dancing and flirting with each other. Kevin Turner and Lisa Welham danced the lovers in the piece. The second half of their duet focussed on their story. Bhuller hinted at the dark side when, after declaring their feelings for each other, their friends on both sides of the religious divide spit self righteous spite and bigotry into their own ears. The focus of the piece is the cost of human conflict in general, which gives the piece relevance over time, despite its initial theme of war-torn Yugoslavian dating. The other reason for this piece was the fact that it related to his grandparents' experience of the Indian partition and showed a similar experience of communities living side by side and then suddenly being asked to move, so parallels were drawn for him with India in 1947.

In 2004, Barnes (former artistic director) reviewed Phoenix's evening of work which consisted of Henri Oguike's *Signal*, Rui Horta's *Can you see me*, Bhuller's *Source 2* and Maresa von Stockert's *polystyrene dreams*. It was a diverse set of works, all of which were different in mood and style, but all very accessible. Barnes notes this repertory is not necessarily experimental or cutting edge, but rather 'these works affirm Phoenix Dance Theatre's association with contemporary dance. Phoenix's

current performative act seems another level of sophistication' (2004, n.p). The dancers' performance was committed and did not necessarily display an allegiance to a particular race or culture. Phoenix had put together a repertoire that mixed popular culture and high art which was 'giving Rambert a run for its money' (Craine 2006). Bhuller's Phoenix bore a great resemblance to LCDT run by Robert Cohen, whom Bhuller had danced with for fifteen years. In 1994, ACE had withdrawn its funding from LCDT because it thought that repertory companies did not have a future. To mark the company's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Phoenix pioneered three new works by Javier de Frutos, Arthus Pita and Bhuller at Sadler's Wells in 2006. De Frutos created a piece inspired by Mexican music, Pita created a funny, surreal take on *Snow White*, and Bhuller created an abstract solo based on the colour red. In some ways, Bhuller is a contemporary dance 'traditionalist', someone who does not necessarily follow the fashions of the time. He has remained loyal to the Graham Technique which he sees as an 'internal, visceral technique' and, with its use of gravity, one which unlike ballet feeds emotion (see Leask 2004: 40). It is easy to identify within Bhuller's dance vocabulary that the dancers are very grounded and this reflects the 'reality of the people'; it's a physical identity that comes through every movement. Bhuller identified work that was dance theatre based and that told a narrative (which as explained, probably came from his grounding at Harehills), at a time when other contemporary dance companies were favouring formalist choreography.

## Phoenix Dance Theatre: Conclusion

Campbell and other artistic directors that followed wanted to establish Phoenix as a successful, middle scale, contemporary dance company, without the burden of the label 'Black'. Under Morris' leadership, for example, a piece of choreography was commissioned by Bebe Miller, an African American. *Spartan Reels* was the result, but Miller told Adair that although Phoenix had a good deal to offer, they were constrained by expectations of 'the old Phoenix'. It has been the aim of many of the artistic directors in Phoenix's history to subvert the tendency for the company to be discussed only in terms of ethnicity which has been problematic throughout its history.

One of the paradoxes which the company faced was that of the 'burden of representation' (Mercer 1994). The dancers were expected by the funding bodies, critics and audiences to be a 'community'. Such expectations contained and constrained these artists who were expected to represent an imagined ethnicity (much like Jeyasingh has articulated and has been analysed in the previous chapter). The African diaspora is a utopia; an 'eruption of space into the linear temporal order of modern black politics which enforces the obligation that space and time must be considered rationality' (Gilroy 1993: 198). Richard Wright (1957) locates the expression of the Black Atlantic in the use of mainstream contemporary dance techniques in the diasporic tradition of bitterness, while Gilroy calls the condition of 'being in pain' (ibid: 203). Either articulation suggests that the Black Atlantic will be recognised in the practice of mainstream techniques by Black bodies through the pervasive dissatisfaction with existing modes of expression, and the

need and desire to remake and bring relevance to the practice of mainstream contemporary techniques. Due to the fluctuating nature of Phoenix's identity, cultural make up and of their choreographers and artistic directors, it has meant that it is visible to see varying articulations and levels of expression of the Black Atlantic in Phoenix's performances.

DeFrantz argues that concert dance can never be vernacular: 'dance that is prepared can only make reference to dance that emerges within the closed black space' (2000: 5). Gilroy reminds us that 'the globalisation of vernacular forms means that our understanding of antiphony will have to change' (1993: 110). This need not be seen as a negative, but as a positive influence, especially in terms of dance scholarship and dance making, as we articulate the progression and construction of bodies in postcolonial and diasporic circumstance.

A report entitled *Attitudes Among Britain's Black Community Towards Attendance At Arts, Cultural and Entertainment Events* (1990), commissioned by ACE, gives some insight into several of the issues that were raised earlier in this chapter by Lewis (about the difficulty to tell whether there are a lack of black people in the arts audiences because they tend to be working class or because of the dominance of white cultural forms). The study was based on the assumption that African Caribbean and Asian people rarely attended arts and entertainment events, because they were rarely seen at mainstream events. The research, however, showed this assumption to be flawed, because the communities evolved their own entertainment structures. Entertainment and the arts are important aspects of these communities;



but in order to encourage them to attend events, good marketing strategies were identified as necessary. Phoenix grew out of state education and its outreach work is at the centre of its activities as a company. It means that issues of accessibility are understood and backed by the company because of their background and the limited horizons that were expected for them. In 2003, Bhuller acknowledged that:

What's difficult for us now is when we perform in the kind of area that we originally came from and the residents can't afford our ticket prices. We then have to get our money from somewhere else – the white middle class, and I don't have a problem with that. But it's the kids in the inner cities who have the hard time and we're constantly trying new ways of reaching them (Bhuller in Swift 2003: 68).

It has been highlighted that Phoenix have been concerned with the demand for recognition and cultural equality, rather than being categorised under the label of cultural diversity. As Natasha Bakht pointed out in an article concerned with the difficulties of overcoming stereotyping, 'Essentially, we [Black people] are asking for the freedom to be unpredictable' (1997: 9). Cultural diversity condemns the diverse to be diverse, rather than to have equal rights to the same resources for cultural development. Thus, issues about how artistic excellence is judged and stakeholder's expectations of the company have been a constant 'battle'. One of the difficulties that Phoenix have encountered, resulted from a tendency to place them, as Black artists, frequently in a position of being 'representative' and speaking 'for the Black community' (Mercer 1994). The specificity of the artists is eroded under such a burden. But it is this expectation to be representative which emerges in critics' writings about Phoenix and is evident in such labels as 'the Black dance group'. The specificity of Phoenix's art practice is lost when such labels are applied to it, as the

work of the company is only viewed through the lens which this label offers, rather than acknowledging the diversity of Phoenix's dance practice. Another factor that contributes to the mythology about Phoenix is that they were not trained (the founders were in their teens when the company formed and had not gained the formal three year dance training at a conservatoire that most contemporary dance practitioners and company members will have received). There is an assumption linked with this that fits into the racial ideology, which is that people of African and African Caribbean descent have inherent rhythm and physicality, and that the dancers 'dance naturally'.

## **Case Study 2: Bode Lawal**

Lawal is amongst a small group of choreographers who are determined to keep the African based dance work 'alive' and acknowledged for critical recognition in the UK, despite being superseded by the continued rise of hip hop dance theatre work. For Lawal, the term 'black dance' is 'degrading, it's disrespectful. They [people] don't say "white dance" choreographer' (Lawal in Adewole 1997: 15). As has been highlighted earlier in this chapter, the black dancing body is an ambivalent entity, full of contradiction and there are immediate assumptions made about what this body should perform and deliver on stage, for example, Emma Stevenson (2009) wrote of Lawal's production of *Respite*:

Surprisingly for a company based on African People's Dance, only one of the dancers was black and displayed the remarkably presented physique and captivating dynamism seen in many African dancers. He featured, often

acrobatically, in one of the many explosive phases. Leanne Taylor was also strong in the piece, fully inhabiting the wild nature of the moves (2009, n.p).

Due to the 'insecurity' of Black dance in Britain and its positioning within the dominant discourse, Lawal has attempted to create his own dance technique (partly by 'cleaning and polishing' the African Nigerian dance technique) which can be assessable in relation to other dance techniques (such as ballet and contemporary dance techniques) that are being used within the sector currently and to try and achieve appreciable British acceptance (see Sakoba Dance 2015). Lawal has employed the strategy of developing a 'universal' technique in order to counter the limits that are placed on his work because of critical discourse, terminology (such as 'ritual' and 'Black dance') and cultural policy. It has been noted that there were companies such as Adzido, who have been positioned in order to promote the work of African and other minority groups within Britain by funding agencies (namely ACE). Lawal's desire for innovation within African dance, however, was mirrored by Peter Badejo, who formed Badejo Arts in 1990. Like Lawal, Badejo opposed Adzido's portrayal of African dance as a static entity, oblivious to social change and encouraged a readiness to adapt tradition to personal experience. Thus, in an attempt to resist the way in which critics and funders can deprive the African dance forms of their value, consideration as 'serious' art and a place within the British dance discourse (such as the case of Adzido) Lawal has utilised and promoted his work as being postmodern. This postmodern attitude and approach has meant that Lawal tends to reject the use of narrative; instead themes are evident and developed. His work celebrates "profound messages", presents unsettling commentaries and images of contemporary life with virtuosity, but whether these 'messages' are visible

to audiences is questionable, since there are discreet and culturally specific African movement languages used.

Gottschild (2003) has highlighted that there are certain expectations and assumptions about 'Black dance' and the lack of knowledge, understanding and the perpetuation of imperialist thinking means that, when audiences hear the term 'African dance' they expect to see it performed alongside African music, improvisation and polyrhythm within the body. Reviews of Lawal's work have highlighted this thinking at times:

The most satisfying element of the show is the live drumming, which features only twice, despite Lawal's claims for importance. However much he wants to make African dance into a vehicle for contemporary expressiveness, ultimately it seems to me it's rhythm, and rhythm along, that drive it (Gilbert 2001, n.p).

As has been examined earlier, the term 'African dance' (although slightly more specific than 'Black dance') is often a misleading term within the British context: African dance cannot be associated with one particular style or technique and in most cases it is associated by a series of physical movements from different regions of Africa, with little or no insight. African indigenous, traditional forms that are geographically specific but reconstructed and practiced in Britain face ghettoisation; considered stereotypical and dismissive. Lawal's postmodern stance (like Berto Persuka's 1940s vision) reflects the dilemma of credibility and need to legitimise Africanist expressions in Britain. Lawal began by attempting to highlight the key principals of movement in African dance that are at times overlooked or made

redundant when reinterpreted by some African choreographers. But interestingly, the same critic, Jenny Gilbert, who wrote the above quote has also highlighted that Lawal is 'angry to think that respect for his work might be no more than racial tolerance. He wants to be seen as vital and contemporary and relevant. An artist, in other words' (ibid). This also highlights Lawal's frustrations about not being considered a part of the British dance discourse, Lawal's company is often billed as the 'first UK post-traditional dance theatre company', and he is determined to move beyond the 'cultural tourism' surrounding African dance that has pervaded cultural policies (for example, Naseem Khan's 1976 ground-breaking report and in ACE reports since they have attempted to question what 'black dance' is). In creating dance theatre work which highlights human consciousness and explores themes relevant to urban, contemporary living, Lawal utilises both modernist and postmodernist traits. Throughout this case study, it will be demonstrated that Lawal is attempting to break out of the 'Black' mould by travelling to various places around the world in order to research and develop a 'universal' technique, but he and his company have encountered various stages in development and funding: in 2008 his ACE funding was cut and he has had to develop partnerships in order to continue to his company's work, so there is the question of whether there is 'space' for him within the British dance sector and whether he has been fully allowed to be a part of the dominant discourse. Lawal is attempting to resist the conflation of blackness with 'tradition' and the reading of the 'Black' category as something that is restrictive and limiting. Instead, Lawal is trying to mobilise blackness as an intervention and a critique of the projected 'universality' of Euro-American modes; appropriation of the 'master culture'. It is clear from some of the venues Lawal's Sakoba Dance Theatre have performed in, some of the projects that they have been involved in and some of

the marketing material that has been produced, that he and his company are being used to 'educate' audiences about African dance. However, because of this Euro-centric reading, the message/s in his choreography may be lost or the intended impact reduced.

### **Career and development of work**

Lawal was born in Nigeria and he first became immersed in the dance tradition of his tribe (his father was a Yoruba chief), then in the larger framework of African national dance. The Yoruba people are one of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria and inhabit the Western part of Nigeria. They are a highly religious people, and this is reflected in their arts and theatre, and more prominently, their dance. There are many different variations and these pantomimic dances with their gestures, steps, costumes and symbols are as carefully planned as ballets (see Daniel 2011). The Yorubas are an artistic people and possessing a highly dramatic mythology, as rich in narrative and as developed as the Greco-Roman. Although the Yorubas are versatile choreographers, most of the characteristics of their dances are also noticeable in most African dances, as dominant movement styles. These characteristics are: tilting of the trunk, bent knees, flat foot, earthbound movements, twisting of the waist, isolation of body parts, syncopated movements, acrobatic steps, expressive movements, shaking of the body (buttocks in female), improvisational movements resulting in polyrhythmic movement style (Ugolo 1998).

When a European dance company visited Lagos, Lawal was so enthralled by discovering a wider tradition that he created an evolutionary form of African People's Dance. He became the Nigerian ministry of culture's dancer of the year in 1985 and then the state paid for Lawal to move to Britain to further his education. He came to Britain with a fellow dancer and drummer, performing in community centres and town halls all over the country. He saw a Ghanaian dance company in Britain, but was more interested in dance drama work. Whilst Adzido was a very prominent UK dance company during the early 1980s onwards, Sakoba was also raising the profile of African dance drama in the late 1980s. After discussion with Hilary Carty (then working at ACE), Lawal went to Paris to study with one of the premier African dancers Elsa Wolliaston, a Jamaican-born dancer who has lived and studied dance in Nigeria, the Congo, the Ivory Coast, Benin, New York and Bali. Wolliaston is renowned for not using music, but teaches students to listen and explore their own bodily rhythms. Lawal admits that, 'when I came back to the UK, Sakoba became a contemporary African dance company meaning that everything we did was relevant to what was happening in this country – there was fusion (Lawal in Bellan, 2006 n.p). Lawal was delighted to be commissioned by Alistair Spalding, of the South Bank Centre, together with organisations in Nottingham, Birmingham and Newcastle, to create a show called *New Moves in African dance* (1996), which really established Sakoba as a serious element of the contemporary dance scene. Lawal believes that he presents 'Post Modern' African Dance:

[I] will not forget my tradition, which is African Nigerian tradition; but what I'm doing with African Nigerian technique is taking it with me and trying to make it look more clean and polished...without losing the source or root of what is happening. African dance today is not just about jumping around like a monkey: it's believing in yourself, dealing with what is happening around you

but using the aesthetic of African traditional dance (Lawal in Barnes 2005: 26).

The period 1993-2000 saw a huge development for Sakoba, resulting in Lawal being awarded an ACE fellowship to study at the University of California, Los Angeles in 2001. Fellowships are awarded to artists in recognition of an outstanding contribution made to the sector over a number of years. The fellowships aim to assist individuals who will continue to enrich the profession in future years. The desire to study in the US seems to establish the notion that British based artists who are Black continually look to the US for 'guidance' and training in order to create something that will become established in Britain. It brings into question whether British based artists who are Black can establish a technique and genre that is independent of the American dance because of the longer established history and academic engagement with African American dance work. Dance critic, Zoe Anderson, is not the only critic to see Lawal's work as 'old fashioned' in comparison to other modern dance in Britain:

In traditional steps and rhythms, Sakoba's dancers look strong and confident. When they turn to abstract dance, the whole performance gets a lot wispier...Iyanu (Miracle) is Lawal as modern dance choreographer. It's abstract, but pious...It suggests an earlier period of American style – the 1970s, not the modern dance of Mark Morris. Indeed, Iyanu's Western touches look old-fashioned (Anderson 2006 n.p).

Thus, Lawal's work is not read as 'modern' and 'contemporary' or understood in the context of other postcolonial dance work. This review makes a subtle indication of the hierarchy of dance styles and the fact that ballet, modern and contemporary



dance forms remain at the top and most valued, which like Curt Sachs' thesis (1937) that 'cultural forms' are seen as social and unrefined (and Sachs has unproblematically grounded the histories and ethnologies of dance in racist and ethnocentric stereotypes of non-European dances and peoples). As was highlighted in Chapter 2, Lawal's work is set within the context of the British multicultural society, with the discourse of multiculturalism inadvertently serving to disguise persistent racial tensions, which affects the respect for the other as a reified object of cultural difference.

In 2003, Lawal was invited by the Dean of Faculty of Arts and Architecture to UCLA as a visiting dance professor, teaching intercultural choreography in the World Art and Cultures department in Los Angeles, California. Due to the interest in his work, Lawal was encouraged to establish Sakoba's sister company in Los Angeles in order to promote the understanding and appreciation of his unique choreography and technique. When Lawal was returning from his fellowship in America in 2003, throughout the ACE's regional offices, the development of African People's Dance was of paramount importance<sup>61</sup>. At this time, there were noticeable hubs of activity, namely the West Midlands, London, North West and Yorkshire. However, it was encouraging to see that Kwesi Johnson (Kompany Malakhi) and Lawal moved into other regions such as that South West and North East to raise the profile of 'Black dance' in those areas. In 2003 (until 2008), Lawal and Sakoba relocated from London to Newcastle. Lawal's decision to relocate was supported by ACE, North East and Newcastle based Dance City. Their relocation was celebrated by those

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<sup>61</sup> One of ACE's priorities at this time was 'celebrating diversity' and the decibel initiative was developed 'in recognition' that black and minority ethnic (BME) artists and arts organisations are under-represented in the arts' (Arts Council of England, not dated, accessed May 2010).

who saw the region's future prosperity at least partly dependent on greater and more obvious cultural diversity. Janet Archer described Lawal as 'a unique and exciting artist' who would 'make a major impact on the broader cultural map in the North' (Archer in Whetstone 2004). The North-East Cultural Diversity Arts Forum (Necdaf) launched a show called *Spotlight* on July 3<sup>rd</sup> 2003 in Newcastle City Hall and Sakoba were the 'headline' performance. Sakoba won Performance of the Year at the Journal Culture Awards. Necdaf brings together three community art forums which were established to support and promote artists of South Asian, Chinese and Afro-Caribbean background. Its professed aim is 'to promote unity through arts and culture'. It is clear that culture was successfully being used as a driver for regeneration. Further, in 2005, Northern Rock Foundation granted Sakoba £150,000 over three years for the running costs and artistic programme to keep them in Newcastle<sup>62</sup>. (Interestingly, from 2008 onwards, there has been a definite attempt to re-establish a place for Sakoba in the South and to focus on relationships with London partners, probably due to the fact that the company's ACE funding was cut and due to Northern Rock not being in a financial position to offer further sponsorship due to being brought by the government to save it from insolvency).

### **Key issues and themes**

Lawal is interested in the spiritual and ritualistic elements of the performance, while stressing and perfecting movement proficiency, thus he takes 'ritual' as 'art'. Similar to postmodern dance which moved away from modern dance's expressionism, Lawal seeks the manipulation of movement filled with spirit, but his work is normally

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<sup>62</sup> Northern Rock became the first bank in 150 years to suffer a bank run after having had to approach the Bank of England for a loan facility, to replace money market funding, during the credit crisis in 2007.

devoid of narrative. Spirituality, as defined by Stewart 'represents the full matrix of beliefs, power, values and behaviours that shape people's consciousness, understanding and capacity of themselves in relation to divine reality' (1998: 1) and it is the combination of form and philosophy that has been the cornerstone for the development of African dance in contemporary dance and theatre in Britain. The 'post traditional' Bode Lawal Technique was born from a spiritual experience in Ecuador while dancing with high priests, and a company-wide desire to represent African dance in a new light. Lawal writes that 'the technique helps you to understand who you are. It's quite spiritual. It allows you to understand movement because it deals with individual body parts – you know what you're doing and you know when you're tired' (Lawal in Eustice 2009 n.p). Dance scholarship has drawn on the ethnographer's insistence upon an acknowledgement of and engagement with the problematic dynamic of the Western 'observer' and the subject, for example, in Barbara Browning's *Samba: Resistance in Motion* (1995) posits that 'the body is capable of understanding more things at once than one be articulated in language.....one has no choice but to *think with the body*' (1995: 13). Scholarship still shows little insight into the detailed practices of social transmission and change, what Jacqui Malone in her history of African American dance calls 'the cultural history of a movement system' (Malone 1996: i).

The apparent unwillingness on the part of public subsidy agencies and promoters to understand the Africanist aesthetics means that there is marginalisation of the African dance form as an art with spiritual and religious influences. To some extent, as religious beliefs and spiritual awareness in the West are receding, African dance practice may suffer. It is generally accepted and perceived that the African dance

evolved as an informal, community-inspired and spiritual form in British society which has laid the forms open to misunderstanding, lack of respect and marginalisation. As was highlighted earlier in this chapter, when BDDT came into existence in 1984 there was a national and international programme to support the educational and spiritual needs of the members. There was an increase in public subsidy to organised companies, of which Sakoba was one. The marginalisation of African dance, whether in a contemporary form or not, continues; the forms are still perceived as 'those of the others'. Thus, Lawal's work which incorporates African dance technique as well as spiritual and ritual elements is particularly important in helping to enrich the cultural realities of British dance audiences.

At the beginning of *Harmony* (2003), the dancers bowed to each other, lifted their hands in prayerful poses and slowly cupped their hands as if anointing themselves with invisible sacred water. Throughout, the multicoloured lighting provided a dramatic backdrop with its shifting hues of orange, red, yellow and green. The piece also contained both African and Brazilian rhythms and motifs, and there was ceremonial movement content and music. There is a heightened trance-like intensity and it could be possible to enter the spiritual realm which Lawal aims to create. If we believe that the dancers are actually able to embody the spiritual essence, then this is not about art for art's sake, but an art for life's sake. Thus, this is an expression of desire, through time and space, to use the body to communicate needs and aspirations in ways that lie beyond ordinary speech. Dance is more than entertainment or decoration, but a sacred act. This ritual performance which enables it to penetrate into the inner nature of both character and audience, to enter what Stanislavski (1950: 72-3) has described as a sense of being present at some

miraculous act of reaffirming the sacred by bringing it to life through a 'great piece of art'; it is necessary to surrender to the histrionic aesthetics of the form. It is a challenge for those who watch if the dancing is subjugated by difference and cloaked with 'Otherness'. It is even more of a challenge when the dancing body embodies, with clarity and prowess, the movement language of difference. His work aims to demonstrate that spirituality is universal, and thus, he uses spirituality to create work that informs, educates and challenges audiences. Lawal is attempting to highlight the underlying threads of tradition that are present throughout the various key principals of movement in African dance that are at times overlooked or made redundant when reinterpreted by some African dance choreographers.

As has been highlighted previously, for any dance form to have longevity, it must be capable of being codified through a language or vocabulary of movement that conforms to a known aesthetic (see Hilary Carty 2007). Lawal has founded a technique as a strategy to counter the scrutiny and inferiority that the African dance form normally encounters<sup>63</sup>. Lawal's marketing material has described BLDT as a 'career-defining project that will forge a pathway towards future generations of aspiring dancers taking to the world stage and performing dance' (Ethnic Now 2007, n.p). So, whilst many white contemporary choreographers may argue that they are attempting to be innovative and devise a movement vocabulary that is entirely new and self-serving (this was especially the case in the 1920s and 30s with the creation of modern dance for example), in Lawal's attempt to create a 'universal' technique

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<sup>63</sup> This is not to say that Lawal is the only choreographer to establish their own technique, for example, due to the influence of the body movements that Germaine Acogny inherited from her grandmother, a Yoruba priest, and to her learning of traditional African dances and Occidental dances (classical and modern), Acogny developed her own technique.

that is African based by studying and mastering various dance traditions from around the world, he has almost become an 'ethnological dancer'. Russell Meriwether Hughes (1898-1989), also known as La Meri, claims to have invented the terms 'ethnic dance' and 'ethnological dancer' as ways to distinguish dances that 'reflect the unchanging mores of the people of all classes....of a particular land or race' from ballet, the dance of an international elite, and modern dance, the reflections of an individual (Hughes 1977: 1-2). La Meri studied studied Flamenco, Bharata Natyam, Javanese dances, and several European folk forms, before performing one after the other in a concert. Acclaimed by audiences around the world throughout the 1930s and 40s, the concerts seemed to offer a window onto diverse societies, signalling the desire to know and communicate with foreign cultures, but also displaying those cultures as small, collectable and lacking in complexity. According to La Meri however, these dances had been spawned by a universal dance of life, a more fundamental and generative energy than that evinced in either ballet or modern dance forms.

In these assertions, La Meri reiterated the views of Curt Sachs, whose *World of History* (1937) presented the first attempt to collate and compare dances from around the world, and who argued that all dance originated in an 'effervescent zest for life' (1937: 3). Thus, both Sachs and La Meri have argued that cultures look different on the surface, but their underlying structures reflect the contours of the human predicament. Whilst dances may manifest in a vast diversity of forms, they are unified by their common function of providing an ecstatic alternative to quotidian

life<sup>64</sup>. Sachs, along with a number of anthropologists and ethnographers of dance, have taken up the position that there is something universal between dance practices and have therefore chosen to examine the commonalities between them. However, Sachs' frequent descriptions of cultures as 'primitive' and his negative value judgements of some of their dances, illustrate both his marked ethnocentricity and his adherence to the now discredited theory of unilinear, progressive cultural evolution. It is this belief of universality that is reiterated by Lawal though: Lawal's vision identifies that all of the 'cultural dances' are 'equal' in technique and use similar visual concepts of gesture with an underlying 'spiritual connection'. Lawal believes that the dance movements originating from the diaspora of Nigeria have a connective quality evident in the framework of other international dance techniques. He writes that the technique 'should be seen as a guide and inspiration for developing a person's own vocabulary and style – a vehicle that is driven by the human spirit and interprets the mediative qualities of dance' (Sakoba website 2009).

Lawal has founded a technique as a strategy for 'being taken seriously' in the British and Euro-American dance discourse. Lawal's inspiration originates from ancestral ritualistic movements embedded in Yoruba tradition of the *orisas*, but he has travelled the globe; Brazil, India, China and Hong Kong, to meticulously research and absorb the influential technical framework of genres whose rich heritage can 'be traced back in time to the origins of dance' (Sakoba website, Research projects 2013, n.p). This process parallels is a form of modernist universalisation, embracing transformation and engaging with the globalisation of the form. Lawal has given

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<sup>64</sup> It should be noted that Susan Leigh Foster in particular, takes issue with this line of argument and quotes Susan Bordo stating 'For the appreciation of difference required the acknowledgement of some point beyond which the dancer cannot go' (Bordo, quoted in Foster 1998: 29).

himself the project of sculpting a new dance technique that will 'not only change the future of African dance but ultimately the way dance practitioners view their profession' (ibid). Working and researching with leading artists such as Rosangela Silvestre (Brazil), Surupa Sen (Nrityaagram, India), and in China and Hong Kong Lawal was exposed to work by the Artistic Director, Willy Tsao through his Hong Kong based City Contemporary Dance Company and the Guangdong Modern Dance Company (a fusion of Graham based contemporary dance work and late twentieth century Chinese ballet, influenced by the Russian ballet tradition) which influenced his technique. These people and research period has provided the 'professional acknowledgement' that Lawal ultimately hopes will make British based dance artists who are Black view their profession differently. Lawal's research and establishment of a technique also contests ideas and popular thinking that African dance is always improvised and spontaneous. In his technique, an evocation of the spirit is fundamental. The precision of movement and gesture emphasises the connection between spiritualism and physicality<sup>65</sup>.

In creating a technique, Lawal is also embodying his personal cultural knowledge system, and has infused Western dance training with movement principals that reflect his own identity; there has been a process of research for creative empowerment and he has developed strategies to physically express internal presence and energy. Lawal's journey to self-define (he did not simply accept the identity prescribed to him by his Yoruba community or by the global dance

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<sup>65</sup> Similar to this, Germaine Acogny also established the Ecole des Sables, International Centre for traditional and contemporary African dances in Senegal, after travelling through Germany, Australia, Japan and the USA. The objectives of the organisation are to provide professional training session for dancers and choreographers from all over Africa, develop knowledge about African contemporary dance, and to encourage communication and collaboration and to create dialogue.



community), has opened the doors to numerous dancers of African ethnicities to empower themselves, gaining access to formal dance training based in the African culture. The technique is rooted in the internal and spiritual practices, which means that inner awareness is imperative.

Although the focus is mainly on African dance, inspiration from the music and movement of other cultures has also been seen in some of Lawal's other work, for example, in the second half of *Okan' Nijo* (which was judged Performance of the Year 2006 in The Journal Culture Awards) it revealed an artistic and spiritual journey as he had developed the piece during a research period abroad; he found connections between dance styles and was inspired by, for instance, the controlled steps visible in China and even the look of parasol-carrying passers-by. Further, '*Clockwork* (Aiduronoijo) is an abstract, upbeat setting of a score by the jazz/classical composer Tim Garland; while in *Love Story* (Ijo'fe) Lawal's choreography is powerfully rooted in African/Nigerian dance styles' (Mackrell 2007, n.p). However, Lawal's work is not just a demonstration of national or cultural dance styles, for they are not presented separately, but are not integrated into the piece. For example, in *Okan' Nijo* the dancers' flexed feet arabesques and weighty rolls evoked contemporary dance and elaborate hand gestures where fingers opened up flowers suggested Kathak's 'hastas'. Lawal has been clear in his marketing material that he wants to capture the spiritual and cultural concepts of dance, pushing beyond national and cultural boundaries, but the extent to which he can be 'successful' depends on the sensibilities of the audience.

Lawal's choreographic style demonstrates his dancers' skill at contrasting fluid body use (as visible in contemporary dance) with staccato, sometimes frenzied, hand movements, with fingers pointing towards the sky. It can be seen as a recuperative attempt at 'celebratory auto-ethnography' (Huggan 2001): Lawal enables an allegedly 'subordinate' culture to regain its dignity; and to reclaim its place, not within the imagined hierarchy of civilisations (which is what Sachs described), but as one civilisation among others – and a sophisticated and intricate one too. As the term 'auto-ethnography' suggests, however, there is no access to an authentic indigenous culture uncontaminated by outside influences and safeguarded against the disruption of its traditional customs and routines. Lawal's hybrid work has been successful in attaching a local, largely spiritual and ritual body of cultural knowledge to an imported ironic sensibility of European invention of an ideal Africa being strategically reinvented by Africans themselves as a means of perpetuating a lucrative system of material exchange (see Huggan 2001). The exotic myth of an unchanging, uncontaminated Africa is paradoxically preserved in European appreciation of African art. When choreographers like Lawal draw on a range of cultural influences in their dance work, audiences become very reliant on overt signals to orientate themselves to the work and to understand how to 'decode them'. For example, in a review of *Respite* (2009), Emma Stevenson writes that 'unfortunately, audience attention was lost in parts...Soon into the piece, I lost the thread, as it abruptly changed from tribal moves to a very literal interpretation of the effects of speed and pressures of today's society' (Stevenson 2009, n.p).

Lawal's work includes elements of bata, a Yoruba traditional communicative dance practice between the worshippers and the deity, which therefore has sacred,

religious elements (see Daniel 2011). Bata is a sacred Yoruba form involving music, movement and spirit and is most associated with the Yoruba orisha (deity), Sango or Shàngó. Yoruba expressions range from the female like sequential, sensual water like moves most associated with Ochún, and Yemayá to the bombastic, male punch-like moves associated with Shàngó. The moves performed are not gender specific. Bata is a distinct technique of drum sounds made by one or several drums that in its sacred form appeases any one of the deities. In *Aiduronijo* and *Okan' Nijo*, Bata informs a non literal execution of physicality and spirit; characteristic Bata movement qualities included are percussive, ballistic, isolations in the chest, hips, head and limbs that mirror the varied sounds the bata drummer makes on djembe and conga. The linearity of contemporary movements, long lunges, lots of angularity in legs and arms, frenetic jumps, parallel bourees are interspersed with strutting, percussive chest moves and isolated hip lifts that typify bata. The performance quality too, is that of Bata; the performer eludes a cool acknowledgement of spectators performing moves as if the audience are not present. The performer can also be quite brazen, breaking the fourth wall with her or his ferocity in physical prowess that does not confront as much as it emphasises an embodied agency and confidence.

In *Sango* (2006) there is a section where the dancers' precise and fluid movements resemble Bata as they move in unison with the hips locked and the pelvis lowered as they ripple down in worship to Sango. Their hands were brought up and down in repetition, travelling in a circle whilst stomping their leg to the ground as they attempted to evoke the Sango God to the space in which they dance in. There is an ensemble of women all costumes in red dresses that signified to the audience sacrificial worship (ritual). The women danced in a circle in very dim lighting, until

they repeated the same movement of the wavering arms and shaking of the hands in a triangular shape. Towards the end of the performance, the female dancers in red are accompanied by two male performers who seam in and out of fighting, and demonstrate levels of power and manipulation. These actions mirror the polyrhythm and its structure in African dance choreography as the female dancers in red signify their possession of spiritual powers, exercising their authority in ritual dance. The dancers moved in and out of the rhythm of the live African drums being played as they dramatically fell to the ground rolling on their backs, the opposite way towards each other. The dancers were the embodiment of the rhythm in the beat of the drums, which dictates their movement and how they come in and out of the dances (see Sakoba Dance, 2011).

Lawal believes that he is presenting 'postmodern' African dance; this stance reflects the dilemma of credibility and need to legitimise Africanist dance expressions in Britain; he does not want to be known for his 'Africanness' alone and shows his awareness of the politics in making dance in Britain as much as it is how he chooses to 'treat' movement content. African dance has never been allowed to be 'modern' (but has been given intermittent visibility and backing within the British context, so has not been seen as a 'viable' aesthetic for many), which leads to the question of how Lawal's work can be described as 'postmodern' and how his work might ever be perceived as 'radical'. Since Lawal is presenting a reinterpretation of African dance with its own movement vocabulary and site of presentation that seeks to challenge the boundaries of what is interpreted and expected as dance theatre, it is this ambivalence attributed to cultural identity that makes Lawal and his dancers an agent of social change. Lawal's work is emotionally driven and the significance of

African dance is clearly evident. Lawal is consciously trying to alter previous conceptions of his community and past to give it 'respectability' and trying to counter the inferior significations placed on 'Black dance' forms.

### ***Aseju* (2005)**

*Aseju* (2005) was a highly theatrical piece for Sakoba and the first full length work, but has received mixed reviews. Lawal used the traditional African idioms (there is evidence of ritual and social dance) in a fractured and disintegrated manner, demonstrating a modernist approach. Lawal wrote of the piece that 'you will see traditional African dance but it's been cleaned, it's been polished' (Lawal in Barnes 2005: 28). This attitude helps to confirm the idea that African dance needs to be more clean and polished to achieve appreciable British acceptance. Sanjoy Roy's review in *The Guardian* (2005) he states: 'If you think African dance is all about traditional rituals, talking drums and dynamic energy, think again' (2005, n.p). *Aseju* (Excess) explored the universal themes such as anger, frustration, jealousy, revenge, which could have been a strategy to appeal to a wide cross section of people, across cultures, age, gender and nationality, and makes the 'postmodern' African dance accessible. Lawal's production notes provided the message that:

Often losing sight of what is truly important; we go about in constant search of wealth, status and material possessions. In our race to reach the top we neglect others, disregard them and mistreat them for our own ends. Subsequently, our days are filled with anxiety, anger, depression and stress. As time goes on, these feelings escalate and soon we find that we are locked in a constant battle with ourselves and those around us. To find true peace, joy and contentment we must show patience, self-control and most importantly take responsibility for our own actions (Lawal 2005, n.p).

This can be seen as an attempt to inspire audiences about revealing the truth about being human and in particular, the 'defiant hope' as a postcolonial artist. The medley of high energy drumming by the trio of musicians, record the very essence of Africanism: 'Its [African dance's] relationship to music, thereby language, is what chiefly distinguishes it from any other art form' (Welsh-Asante 1998: 13). Within the scope of socio-cultural values, drums have their immutable place in the cult of African celebrative moods; dance and music become expressions of the company's beliefs regarding displacement as they are upholding beliefs and knowledge shared by the African community. The drums assist the dancer to build up the movement through the power of the drums being played; the manifestation of the spirit is visible as the connection between the dance and the drumming requires the dancer to be deeply connected to the act of polyrhythm (the ability to step in and out of the rhythm at any given time and to use different body parts to do thus). The spontaneity within the Bata creates a technique of frame of choreographing, which allows the ritual and spiritual response to be maintained and developed in the performance, so that the audience start to evaluate their emotional states within the dance piece. The themes within the piece: bareness, fecundity, chants, pleading, and religiosity, have all been depicted in the performance, which relates to African dance's ability to translate everyday experiences into movement.

*Aseju* was performed in two parts: the first half consisted of two sections, 'Group Intro' and 'Ijogbon' (Trouble). This part of the show demonstrated the dancers' impressively sharp technical skills in abstract compositions that highlight the 'pump'

of their shoulders and the roll and twist of their limbs about their spines. 'Group Intro' started with what appeared to be five dancers walking backwards and then, one man broke out of the formation and started playing a drum. These two disappeared behind a semi-transparent screen and were joined by a third musician. They continued playing African styled music which was rhythmic, attention grabbing and invigorating, whilst the three dancers left were dancing African styled movements in a circle. These dancers whispered whilst holding up a hand to their respective ears, as if talking on their mobile phones – a clear sign of globalisation. 'Ijogbon' started to demonstrate the theatrical elements of Lawal's style. This section combined speech with movement and centred around a man, Lawal, dressed as a woman, who played the part of an infertile wife. The narrative was such that this 'wife' had been married to her husband for ten years and had not been able to conceive. Because of this, the husband went out, got a mistress and got her pregnant. The wife ended up attacking the mistress, hitting and kicking her.

The second half of the show had seven sections; Commute, City, Image, Choices, Social Scene, Consequences and Ritual Dance, which were more narrative scenarios about aspects of modern urban life. The sections were fragmented, short and loosely held together, but in each section you sensed the stylistic root and also saw how Lawal adapted it for the theatre. The rhythms in the music became steady beats for the club scene. In a very provocative podium dance, with Lawal dressed in very small black PVC shorts, all the expansive pump and roll of his body seemed to have been compressed into his pulsating buttocks. The bare torso draws attention to the stereotype of the highly sexualised, muscular African male body. According to French dance journalist Gérard Mayen, the valorisation of the body privileged in

African dance, particularly the male body displaying a nude torso falls prey to the white gaze which is intrigued with the exotic sexual vitality of the black body (2006: 170). Further, since the prominence of the female buttocks is a positive cultural and aesthetic value indicator in some parts of Africa and the African diasporan communities; daily postures and dance aesthetics, emphasising the buttocks and the hips seemed to be more about invoking 'other' cultures, cultural preferences and aesthetics. Nevertheless given the context in which this piece was created and performed, the mainstream contemporary dance context, this invocation of an 'other' aesthetic and culture, which is also non-white, non-Europeanist, already marks it as 'different'. Lawal has been able to provide the audience time and space to consciously process the visual information and recognise the associations, images and stereotypes that it may perceive, but whether audiences recognise this as an opportunity is questionable.

The referencing of Africanist movement styles, marked by the grounded quality, the hip movements and curving of the spine, are celebrated and interwoven in the Euro-American, 'white' movement style of contemporary dance to create a comment and alternative perspective to what is 'acceptable' and conventional contemporary dance and the performance of African dance. In such choreography, subversion and critique are braided with celebration and creativity. Since a series of hip shakes might follow a release-based contemporary dance movement, which is performed with the appropriate stylistic qualities, questions about capability are constantly deferred by the assertion of preference, the politics of the larger socio-cultural world. Its misconceptions and stereotypes are constantly called up and exposed. Importantly, Lawal is able to present unsettling commentaries and images of



contemporary life with virtuosity, whilst facilitating a new and 'contemporary' version of African dance.

In the last part, issues of re-birth and change are explored. In 'Ritual dance', the mood changed and a more solemn atmosphere is depicted, as in the traditional Nigerian prayer to the gods: 'This our disjointed world must change. We must come together in unity and help each other. Mutual respect and consideration (are) the key to peace and harmony in our everyday lives. Only then will true happiness be ours' (Lawal 2005 n.p). *Aseju* contains all the elements associated with African dance theatre work: music, dance, drama, set and other visuals. According to Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert's definition (2002), 'cross-cultural' theatre is characterised by the conjunction of specific cultural resources at the level of narrative content, performance aesthetics, production processes, and/or reception by an interpretive community (2002: 31). This umbrella definition for the wide range of theatrical practices to be encountered in the global arts market is further sub-divided into sub-branches, of which 'postcolonial theatre' engages in 'both a historical and discursive relation to imperialism, whether that phenomenon is treated critically or ambivalently' (ibid: 35). As such, it is also cross-cultural, since it involves the processes of inter-/intra-cultural negotiation in terms of dramaturgy, aesthetics and interpretation according to different audiences. Thus, cross-cultural theatre and Lawal's branch of this, falls in-between the performative popular and traditional modern dance-theatre conventions: *Aseju* utilised popular and traditional accompaniment alongside 'traditional' and contemporary dance movement content to create a piece that was stimulating and spiritual and that had the capacity to comment on the human experience in the global context.

## **Bode Lawal: Conclusion**

On the whole, the novelty of Sakoba's success would seem to lie in its combination of the many dance styles and influences from around the world that its director has encountered, while remaining true to his rich African cultural traditions (Fajemisin, 2005 n.p).

It has been my aim to demonstrate that Lawal and his company have developed strategies in order to find a space within the mainstream of the British dance discourse. This has proved difficult due to the pervading Euro-centric thinking and reading of his work, and the fact that African dance still has its own hurdles to jump (it was highlighted earlier in this chapter that African dance has its numerous genealogies which provide evidence of hectic growth spurts, then disjuncture satisfying or dissatisfying the cultural and social/political needs of its root community and the cultural canon that marginalises it). The Africanist presence in Britain has rarely been acknowledged as a viable dance aesthetic choice. However, Lawal has been able to use his education work as a 'way in' and has been in demand to teach in various British schools and colleges (for example, during one of Sakoba's projects, the technique was taught to aspiring dancers from Cleves School in Weybridge, Hextable School, Kingston College, Calderdale College Halifax and St John Church of England Community School from Dorking), and even in one case, the BLDT has been commissioned to be taught as part of a college's own creative curriculum. The charitable arm of the company ('Sakoba Dance for All') have a very high profile education programme, undertaking workshops, residencies, inclusive and innovative

projects. Sakoba Connect is an educational project started in 2000 working with young people ranging from 11-18 years. The project offered an opportunity for BME [Black and Minority Ethnicities]<sup>66</sup> youth of several ethnic backgrounds from Holy Cross School in Kingston, Surrey, and Exetable School in Swanley to study Sakoba's technique. This kind of education work enables Sakoba to build its audience and train future members of the company; current members of Sakoba, Joao Ferreira and Ria Uttridge, received their training through the project. However, it appears that there is more educational work to be done:

At Winchester's Theatre Royal...[Sakoba] impressed a small but curious audience, including many teenage students with dance on the syllabus, with their own vigorous expression of global contemporary society. Their stock in trade is the dance education workshop and their entry into the arena of performance brings with it many of the features of their educational format...the fact that many of the scenes have to be explained with a vocalised label literally speaks for itself...If Sakoba are to fulfil their stated objective of winning a global audience for performance dance, their sights must rise far above the level of the studio and the barre (Lathan 2005, n.p).

Lawal has been attempting to overturn the conflation of 'blackness' with tradition, and the reading of blackness as something restricting, but as has been seen through the reading of his work by critics, this has not been entirely possible. Lawal's strategy of developing a technique was an attempt to mobilise blackness as an intervention and a critique of the projected 'universality' of Euro-American modes; he envisions his dance making beyond 'cultural tourism' and is attempting to eliminate the vapid use of Africanist expressions (see Sakoba website, Lawal Dance Technique, 2013).

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<sup>66</sup> The acronym BME and the phrase BME communities are commonly used by Voluntary and Community sectors and other government agencies. It is a catch-all term to include all those who would not who do not describe themselves as 'White British' on an ethnicity questionnaire. The term is used here to describe all ethnicities, particularly those disadvantaged and disenfranchised demographics of Sakoba's education group included 'White British' as well as a variety of other ethnicities.

There is a risk, of course, in creating the idea that there is a 'universal' African-derived (or non-European) dance as the 'source' will be unacknowledged and it will not belong to a particular people; there is a loss of connection between the movements and the new context, which means that in this instance, the energy exchange that is critical to West African based dances does not occur. It has been evident that Lawal has utilised movement content that is consistent and/or similar to some of that seen in other British and American contemporary dance. In using movements from mainstream dance styles and adapting them with an Africanist 'twist', Lawal plays with established cultural and aesthetic concepts repeatedly inserts his presence in them in a way that should demand their redefinition, but critics are seeing this as 'old fashioned' modern dance work. For Lawal too, identity is fired by nationalistic and racial pride and the demands of modernist recuperation. The notion of reclaiming the past through politics, memory and desire, rejecting a simple notion of recuperation (could be said to have fuelled the desire to revise Bharata Natyam in the 1930s). By subverting some of the obvious attitudes and assumptions of the modern, and by mediating a contemporary relationship with 'tradition' and culture through constructed and reconstructed narratives, means that Lawal's work can be seen as postmodern.

From the choreographic analysis presented, I have demonstrated that Lawal creates dance works that deal primarily with the human consciousness from an African perspective. Whilst his technique may originate from ancestral ritualistic movements, it also embraces and complements 'other' dance styles: 'the technique should be seen as a guide and inspiration for developing one's own vocabulary and style; a vehicle that is driven by the human spirit' (Sakoba Website 2011). Lawal has been

able to study the American dance tradition which he has used to extend the work of his company Sakoba, to include the wider contemporary African diaspora and seeks to mould himself like Alvin Ailey (Lawal in Barnes 2005, n.p). I feel that Lawal has made huge strides in establishing a technique that is independent of American dance, but there are elements which are consistent with this form evident in his practice. Long lunges, lots of angularity in the arms and legs, big jumps and other movements associated with contemporary dance are also evident in Lawal's work, but with chest pumps in time with the percussive drumming and hip isolations that provide an 'African twist'. Lawal and his company enjoy a good level of 'success' in that his company continues to make work and tours to venues across the country, but is still not perceived as a 'mainstream' company; he has viewed the dominant culture from a critical distance by creating a dance technique that is part of a modernist universalising project, but he has not forcefully examined aspects of British culture in order to be recognised as intrinsic to the development of a Black British dance form.

Lawal's work is able to engage in the politics involved in making dance in Britain as well as make artistic decisions about how to treat choreographic content in a way that is informed by his postcolonial identity. As was highlighted earlier in this chapter, dance artists that use Africanist expressions are burdened by cultural obligation. Although Lawal's work often receives mixed reviews, modernist tendencies are evident; he fractures and fragments traditional African dance to create alternative movement possibilities and forms of signification, which is implicitly an attempt to disrupt the dominant discourse in Britain. The unsettling commentary and image of contemporary urban life alters the 'traditional' to form the new context. Overt facial

expressions disguise the underlying meaning of the piece; extreme laughs, grimaces, abrupt smiles, the attitude of the performance of simple movements such as walking and rhetorical significances offer contradiction and parody. These are all decisions that Lawal has made about how to 'treat' the characteristics evident within African dance forms and strategies (apparent within much contemporary dance work), which is connected to his position as someone excluded from the mainstream. It is possible to learn the aesthetic principles of given dance forms. The practice of a new hybrid dance form can evolve and develop. However, this hybridisation often brings about misunderstanding and confusion, as audiences, dancers and choreographers do not necessarily understand the relationship to the African diaspora and the 'original' and 'traditional' practice; what level of spiritual engagement do the dancers and the audience achieve in this 'post-traditional' work and how much has it become detached in terms of spiritual response? Lawal has chosen to revive what is known while retaining the dignity that traditional African dance forms receive in America and the African continent, but is still absent in Britain.

### **Case Study 3: Robert Hylton**

Hylton's work celebrates his fractured history and looks to opportunities to 'invent' aspects of hip hop's future in the British context. This case study will investigate Hylton's allegiance to the classicism of hip hop dance, which partly articulates his position of resisting the commercialisation of the form, but it is also a strategy to counter the limits placed on his work; he is appropriating classicism as a facet of the master culture. Hylton has been attempting to mobilise the category of hip hop which

is conflated with the 'popular' and commercial markets and is attempting to 'educate' audiences as to the legacy of an urban youth culture and the form is already globalised, it is possible to locate a 'Britishness' within Hylton's work. For a while he was politically successful in making his brand of hip hop theatre work a part of the British mainstream dance discourse in so far as he received backing from the ACE. Similar to Lawal's company Sakoba, this funding was cut in 2008 which means that since then there has been no 'space' for his work. Hylton has consistently articulated his frustrations about the fact that critics, funders, programmers and audiences have particular assumptions and misinterpretations about his identity which do not allow him to deal with 'big' social issues:

I would ask that I be placed on the merit of my work...some directors and programmers as brave and patient as myself encourage the potential of my work and my company. But if the dance sector chooses to focus on my heritage, then please be more informed about it. I'm a northerner with northern values...I am of dual heritage with a cultural upbringing of both black and white values, but led by hip hop philosophies (Hylton 2009, n.p).

### **Career and development of work**

Hylton began his dancing career during the explosion of hip hop dance in the 1980s which has meant that the form has always been a source of inspiration for him. In the late 1980s when hip hop was disappearing, he discovered UK Jazz Dance and was heavily inspired by groups like IDJ and Brothers in Jazz<sup>67</sup>. He continued to develop

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<sup>67</sup> Jane Carr (2012) has undertaken an historical investigation into the styles of jazz dance practiced in clubs in Britain in the early 1980s and highlighted their importance as an aspect of British dance heritage. A particular jazz dance battle between dancers from IDJ and Brothers in Jazz is used as an example of how a generation of dancers established hybrid British styles of virtuosic dancing. In so doing, they generated new forms of dance praxis that challenge received categories bifurcating dance into social versus theatrical dancing and popular culture versus high art.

performance and training in the hip hop style, as well as attending full time vocational training at the Northern School of Contemporary Dance (NSCD) in Leeds gaining a BA in Dance. During this rigorous training, Hylton will have experienced daily technique session in ballet and Graham based contemporary dance and time to develop and experiment as a choreographer, as well as a performer. This discipline and how to work creatively in a studio is what continues to be a part of the way that Hylton works and passes on through his educational work. Hylton has articulated that whilst he was able to master the technique and movement content of ballet and contemporary dance at NSCD through the daily training, but whilst he was performing with his body, his mind was not agreeing with the philosophies that underlie these techniques (especially ballet): 'My own social boundaries, upbringing and education had not let me to that hierarchic point' (Hylton in Hutera 2011, n.p)<sup>68</sup>. And yet, funding bodies and critics are also reluctant to label Hylton's work as 'contemporary' since it does not particularly confirm to images and the style of Euro-American modern dance. Because there are obvious and recognisable elements of hip hop dance in Hylton's work, it is not classified as being able to be 'contemporary' and criticise dominant discourse; the system is extremely wary of what it does not completely understand and thus does not integrate the form and culture completely, but also belittles it (as has been demonstrated earlier in this thesis). After leaving NSCD Hylton became an apprentice at Phoenix in Leeds from 1995-6. His enthusiasm for popping, break jazz and hip hop continued, and as a performer,

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<sup>68</sup> Jonzi D has also talked about how his training at London Contemporary Dance School was difficult because he wanted to break dance at the same time as studying classical ballet and contemporary techniques, which made him feel 'as if my body was colonised' (Jonzi D in Phillips 2001: 4). For Jonzi D, these dance techniques did not feel enabling, but rather limited this potential to improvise, and his perspective counters the commonly held belief within contemporary dance communities that technique is a pre-requisite for choreographic creativity.



Hylton danced for several contemporary dance companies including Phoenix, Jonzi D and as a guest artist with Sheron Wray's *JazzXchange*.

Hylton's work has been influenced by his exposure to the work of Sheron Wray. Wray was an exponent of a mainstream company (Rambert Dance) during the 1990s and like many other Black exponents, became confident in their approaches to established techniques. In 1992, Wray formed JazzXchange Music and Dance Company, seeking to remove the restrictive barriers codifying the art form of Jazz and present a new 'world' view on dance. Taking her influence from the world of Jazz music, her intention was to create a real international language and fresh appeal through the repertoire which is based on a desire to reunite jazz dance and music, incorporated a graceful fusion of classical, contemporary, jazz and street techniques, performed to the backdrop of live jazz compositions (see JazzXChange website). Wray contradicted the notion that dancers merely obeyed choreographic instruction and laced her pieces with an atmosphere of improvisation. The company's consistent two-fold approach, combining experimental work and those forms which have popular culture at its roots, made it possible to create and perform in different arenas both within dance and music settings.

There is, for Wray, an inextricable link between Jazz music and Jazz dance: the syncopation and improvisational riffs of jazz music give rise to the aesthetic of Jazz dance. Just as jazz musicians riff (any variation or improvisation from the melody) off a basic structure, so jazz dancers are encouraged to find freedom within form: 'To truly be a jazz artist means to be able to speak in the language yourself. It teaches

dancers to dance without it being a literal representation of someone else's choreography' (Wray in Kay 2010). Jazz is a strategy for making art, a particular aesthetic approach to art practice, whether movement or music, that is a response to or is inspired by lived experience. When using this strategy, the improvisatory act becomes the visual articulation of embodied knowledge that reveals individualistic expressions (see Monson 1996, Fischlin & Heblin 2004, Ake 2002). Wray is looking for 'jazz' in the dance that she knows instead of bodily narratives that exemplify the use of conventional jazz dance vocabularies, which demonstrates her relationship to classicism. One has to start somewhere, though, and, for dance, one can only start with the self; embodied knowledge the dancer already knows through their own body and from what is known and experienced comes a creative choice that indicates deliberate exclusions and altered inclusions.

African dance scholar, Alphonse Tiérou (1989) has observed that:

Africans tend to be uninterested in any art that lacks improvisation...every innovation and creation involves a thorough knowledge of technique which can then be 'forgotten' in order to allow spontaneous personal interpretations...Improvisation in Africa is not a result, as in the West, of spontaneity, but much more of the creative imagination of the improviser who applies himself to a given subject known to everybody...(1989: 18-9).

Through the African performer's innovation within the improvisation of the dance, the communal experience is heightened, common values refreshed and aesthetic values

enhanced. Hylton continues to investigate his own liminal space of movement vocabularies through improvisation<sup>69</sup>.

When one watches Hylton dancing, his display of weight suggests a bodily narrative familiar to ballet and contemporary dance, with recognisable lines and movements such as pliés which illustrate his 'other' dance knowledge. There is an improvisational aspect to the work, which allows for his individual bodily knowledge to come through. Hip Hop's unique quality comes from its palpable projection of physical dynamism. Thus, Hylton's work draws on all of these influences; contemporary, classical jazz and hip hop dance, to create work that is more than just hip hop.

In 2004, Hylton's company was classified under the 'Black arts' label at the British Dance Edition. Previously, Hylton had shared the bill with the likes of Protein Dance and Fin Walker as a contemporary theatre artist, but this label meant that he was seen as a 'black dance artist'. As a result of funding changes in 2004/5, ACE had available £1,011,000 to invest in organisations with a focus on developing African People's Dance (APD) in the year 2005/6. As was highlighted in Chapter 1, cultural

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<sup>69</sup> Although outside the time frame of this thesis, a clear example of how Hylton has exposed the improvisatory act and the way in which work can be structured, can be seen in his 2009 solo *I don't know, what do you think?* for the Nottdance festival. In this performance, he further developed his investigation into using music as a medium for exploration, initiating the use of different dance styles as a way to express himself. Hylton invited the audience to control their own experience of the performance; he openly spoke and addressed the audience throughout, which is a characteristic of African dance and helps to prompt a 'real' response from the audience and draw them into the performance. Through a verbally driven narrative, Hylton shared his own thoughts, dilemmas and personal stories of making dance and exploring musical choices, mixing humour, emotion and storytelling. Hylton was also able to draw attention to the history of hip hop, whilst displaying an innovative and forward-looking account. The improvisation solo used the music as its catalyst, whilst acknowledging the legacy of the form.

diversity was one of ACE's aims and their corporate plan which set out to increase the number of BME led organisations as a priority. As it was noted that Black dance had very little infrastructure, the decision was made to spend the funding in the area of APD. The ACE invited applications for regular funding: a number of factors were taken into account when choosing the organisations invited to submit to this funding opportunity. They included the organisation's strategic role, effective operation methods, track record and contribution to ACE's Ambitions for the Arts. The regular funding on offer comprised a three-year financial commitment to ACE to invest in the artistic activity of the organisation. Urban Classicism was one of the companies to receive the funding in order to create high quality APD work.

However, in 2008, amongst those who no longer received ACE funding were Chisenhale Dance Space, Hylton's Urban Classicism, Independence, Union Dance, Sakoba and Anjali Dance Company. Urban Classicism lost 80% of its budget and folded. It was necessary to cancel the company's biggest tour yet, a show called *Swan Breaks*. The company was made dormant so that Hylton could return to performing as a soloist. The continuation of the Urban Classicism education programme was possible. Hylton has suggested that hip hop could have longevity if it plays an active role in the lives of young people (Hylton in Egere-Cooper 2006). Hip hop is definitely becoming more popular on main stages in high profile venues, and it reflects the interests of young people and youth culture. Education programmes of dance companies continue to be an integral part of their work and remit, which also makes Hylton's funding cut quite controversial, since his company had a very successful education branch, offering workshops and residencies designed to promote street forms of dance, as well as formal modern dance

techniques<sup>70</sup>. Hylton's numerous projects (educational and community) creates an instant bond with a whole new audience and erodes the traditional Western barrier between audience and performer by encouraging participation in the form.

### **Key issues and themes**

Despite several decades and contexts of use in different locations, embodied knowledge of hip hop with its particular aesthetic, bodily architecture and dynamics has survived and developed (see Hazzard-Donald 1996, DeFrantz 2004b, Huntington 2007, Rajakumar 2012). Passed from generation to generation, this expression retains nuances in movement that distinguish it from other dance forms even if this disparity confirms similar origins. Hylton uses the terminology 'urban classicism' to describe his work to acknowledge the legacy of hip hop dance. By attributing the 'classical' to urban dance expressions, Hylton attempts to acknowledge a legacy of exploration that has continued since the jook halls along rural branches that connected the dance and music of urban communities after the civil war in America, continuing to the first break dancers in the early 1980s, to the present. The classicism in urban respects the tradition and history of hip hop. Black classicism does not propose a model for the classical tradition, but rather, the tradition is broader in its appeal and understood in the global context. Further, Hylton brings together theatrical knowledge of composition and time and space in order to choreograph aspects of his dual identity and training in the British context. Narrative is a constant in Hylton's work, but the work is not overly literal. Even though on stage DJs are very much part of the performance, the music used allows for a reading of

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<sup>70</sup> Hylton has been able to continue delivering a successful educational and community programme despite his funding cuts.

the dance work that is not commercially driven and/or the music does not provide constraints as to how the work should develop. This then produces a 'hip hop based company using contemporary dance and abstraction but with a non-commercial point of view' (Hylton 2006, n.p). Hylton's productions have an integral relationship with their use of film, dance for the camera and moving images as backdrops.

Hylton's solo film piece *Innocence* (2004) is a clear example of the way in which he is attempting to mobilise hip hop dance with these other influences. He dances with complete assertion, and includes body popping, waving and sliding in his dancing. There are snapshots of words, pictures and other hip hop performers. Hylton seems to borrow some of these movements and the confidence with which he does this suggests a reinvention. The viewer watches and questions whether Hylton is inviting them to battle with him, or whether he is just battling with inner emotions and thoughts. This is a clear example of the way in which Hylton is highlighting the legacy within which he works. The viewer is drawn to consider the value of an interested and committed historicising. Remembering the past is laden with possibilities for present mobilisation, so that it remains alive, not monumentalised and remembered through empty nostalgia.

As Hylton uses hip hop to inform the style and content of his work, his work creates an instant bond with audiences, and serves to erode the traditional Western barrier between audience and performer by encouraging participation: the company 'enrich people through shared culture' (British Council 2010, n.p). *Fresh: A Spaghetti and Fried Chicken Western* (2007) is based on trainer culture and features a full western

set designed by Emma Wee. Trainer culture and hip hop has always worked hand in hand and walking into a room full of other trainer enthusiasts and other Black British youths with an exclusive pair of trainers on, can silence a room as everyone ogles and envies the footwear – just like in a western when a lone stranger comes into town (see Hylton 2014). As Tricia Rose points out, ‘the global circulation of hip hop music and culture has produced new black diasporan links’ (1997: 267). Whilst some choreographers and audiences may be able to distinguish between ‘top rocking’ and ‘popping’, mainstream dance venues and discourse sees hip hop as a dance craze in its totality. The appeal of hip hop seems to cross boundaries of class and culture, perhaps because, as Billy Biznizz suggests ‘what the youth see in hip hop is hip hop class and culture which has no boundaries’ (Biznizz in Winship 2005: 26). As was highlighted earlier in this chapter, Black social dance forms (such as Swing, Lindy Hop and the Cakewalk) are constructions of outwardly entertaining and secretly derisive rhetoric, as has been articulated by cultural theorists such as W.E.B. DuBois (DuBois was an American civil rights activist, sharing in the creation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909 and edited *The Crisis*, its magazine from 1910 to 1934, he was a very important protest leader in the US during the first half of the twentieth century). DuBois’ theory of ‘double consciousness’ articulated as ‘two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings.....in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder’ (1961: 3). DuBois suggests a doubling of desire contained by the tenacity of the black body, and although he was not discussing in relation to dance and music, it’s applicability to these areas are clear since black people have ‘released’ this into their work. Utilising this theory, it is clear why Hylton is able to attract a broad cross-section of audience members; he is able to attract not only hip hop fans,

but young people of all cultural origins; Black, White, Asian and other backgrounds. The company, with its versatile repertory, aims to reach a wide audience of all sizes and backgrounds. However, Hazzard-Donald discusses the negotiations of hip hop dance:

Hip hop dance permits and encourages a public (and private) male bonding that simultaneously protects the participants from and presents a challenge to the racist society that marginalises them. The dance is not necessarily observer friendly; its movements establish immediate external boundaries while enacting an aggressive self-definition. Hip hop's outwardly aggressive postures and gestures seem to contain and channel the dancer's rage (Hazzard-Donald 1996: 229).

The themes of challenge and competition negotiated in hip hop's bodily aesthetics change when appropriated into the mainstream media. The commercialisation of hip hop dance has meant that there is limited understanding and education about the form, Hylton has articulated his frustrations about this commercialisation and lack of knowledge amongst people creating hip hop work.

The lack of documentation of the history and technique of hip hop and the lack of credible artists, is connected to what Hylton sees as the theft of the dance style by studios and the creation of a local and international dance network that endorses dancers with qualification based on their own version of what hip hop dance really is. Hylton's *Landscapes* (2002) was intended to be a satirical comment on futuristic oral and physical communication, which showed two men and one woman investigating future possibilities of evolving societies, the main focus being modern language both spoken and physical. This theme of looking to the future extended to a harmonious



vision of togetherness. The piece included the manipulation of body popping and locking, break dancing with Capoeira. Compositional strategies redefine space, switch focus, alter facings, flip moves, enhance, fragment, then relocate the design of arm to leg (see Hylton 2012). These compositional devices are similar to those choreographic explorations of Khan and Jonathan Burrows (one of the UK's leading choreographers noted for his musicality, intelligence and humour within his work), for example. His compositional strategies seek cultural fulfilment, but the improvisational nature of the piece allows for moments of individuality as the performers 'swagger' around the space and refers back to the African roots of the form. The use of language, dance and music to comment on, or subvert hegemonic practices while tapping a communal base of knowledge uses reinvention or reclamation to destabilise hegemonic discourses. Acknowledging the legacy and development of hip hop is an essential part of the work. Thus, Hylton is definitely articulating an informed and critical deployment of cultural knowledge.

### ***Verse and Verses (2006)***

Hylton's *Verse and Verses* (2006) explicitly celebrated his dual heritage. Hylton has been able to articulate his frustrations of being expected to represent his black heritage, but also highlight that the aesthetic identity of a dance form is being used to identify the dancer:

I, first and foremost am an artist, and one of dual heritage, although my work personality is grounded in black culture and I have previously and admittedly taken part in black dance platforms. But does this mean that as I metamorphose from ballet to contemporary to popping I am going from white

to white to black? Am I presenting a schizophrenic movement base, or am I moving from an informed physical base built through study? (Hylton 2009 n.p).

*Verse and Verses* allowed Hylton to celebrate his dual identity and the mixed mediums of dance and communication. The concept of the piece veers to the cinematic as a DJ opens the piece, selecting a 'hot tune'. The stage space is transformed by a set of visual installations which makes the dancers appear as if they are moving in amongst the sound and musical energy, and sometimes suspended between different tracks. Thrown into alternative zones, the dancers spiritually morph into musical notes in a quest for their ultimate style and perfection. During the piece there is a close up animation of a vinyl record projected onto the back wall, while a dancer squats at the side. The dancer pumps his legs like a sprinter on the starting blocks, but instead of racing through the track, he 'gets into the groove', letting the music bounce his body slowly forward; a metaphor for the journey that Hylton is taking through discovering his place within the genre and its relationship to the British context.

There is a section with two male/female duets. The way in which break dance and contemporary dance moves were incorporated into sequences of contact work was seamless and very 'athletic'; it was very adventurous as dancers were pushed to their limits by their partners. Headstands, one handed handstands, spins and flips merged to create a collage of physical trickery with smooth transitions. Individually, the performers showed off their best stunts in a square of light, the 'free-styling' goes until a dramatic pose or gesture ends the sequence, which could be West or Central

African-derived 'cuts', 'feints' or 'breaks'. Audiences are unafraid to show their appreciation and become immersed in the performance by cheering and applauding, perhaps mostly due to the virtuosic nature of some of the movement content, rather than an appreciation and understanding of the cultural references. Regardless of which African heritage might be referenced, often the learned viewer can see flashes of sacred African dance movements within secular diaspora performance. This is contrasted with a solo performed by Jake Nwogu who demonstrated excellent ballet technique against the hip hop music, attacking the floor with wild jumps and high speed *soubresauts* and shows the true expression of the dancer's physical identity.

### **Robert Hylton: Conclusion**

Hylton's identity and work is complex; his work is grounded in black culture and he has performed and been programmed in black dance platforms, but he also has a white mother, with a white heritage and formal training. He could 'play white' (not acknowledging a dual heritage) and re-adjust himself to denounce his 'street dance' identity, which would mean that he would be a fairly young white artist who encapsulates the fusion of street dance within a formal contemporary idiom. But as has been argued throughout this thesis, as his identity is complex (specifically his 'blackness') and Hylton is open to 'educating' audiences about the tradition of hip hop and its philosophies, he has been positioned outside of the dominant discourse. Hylton has stressed the classicism of hip hop and has appropriated classicism as a strategy to counter the limits of the form. His work does not conform to images of Euro-American modern dance and is therefore, not ready as 'contemporary' as hip hop is linked with popular culture and has been considerably commercialised. His

interest in improvisation has meant that there is a visual articulation of embodied knowledge that can reveal individual expressions; the embodied knowledge that the dancer already knows, allows the creative choice that indicates deliberate exclusions and altered inclusions. He is committed to 'educating' audiences as to the legacy of the form which allows for a 'double reading' of his work for those who are versed in the history of hip hop. Hylton's work appeals to a wide cross section of audiences: his choreographic explorations, inclusion of contemporary dance and use of abstraction, mixed with the use of improvisation acknowledges and refers back to the African roots of the form. If one is able to employ DuBois' notion of 'double consciousness', one has to take into account when reading of Hylton's work that the use of a 'popular' and 'social' dance like hip hop remains 'private' and only fully understood by those initiated into black social dance styles: Hylton's body is allowed a self-conscious ability to celebrate and protest simultaneously (as Gilroy has highlighted that Black bodies have been able to gain after the civil rights activism). Whilst 'uneducated' audiences may see virtuosity in the precision and attack of the hip hop content, it is actually the racialised cultural history that makes Hylton's work powerfully compelling and able to critique racial norms. As DeFrantz has argued 'Black social dance is inevitably tied to the construction of personal identity, by dancers and the participating' (2004b: 8). Hylton's work is an articulation of the communicative desire which drives hip hop dance and is a marker of his identity within the British diaspora.

## **British based dancers who are Black: Conclusions**

Africanist dance forms in Britain are clearly diverse. There is a huge disparity in terms of development and financial support which makes the cataloguing of African dance in the British context very complicated. Africanist expressions in the British context, whether 'traditional' or otherwise, do not re-present a form of cultural nationalism, but they do amass a cultural allegiance. However, Black dance artists/companies are considered stereotypical (in that they should represent their community and perform specified 'traditional' African movement content) and dismissed. British based artists who are Black have not necessarily received the recognition that they have deserved and are not fully 'written' into the history of British dance, thus, it has been necessary to consider the aesthetic, institutional and conceptual problems which have rendered such artists and companies 'invisible'. Despite the problems that have faced British based artists who are Black in the past (and present), artists such as Lawal are establishing dance techniques and choreographic works that reflect a postmodern dance aesthetic. Ramdhanie (2005) has highlighted the fact that at the turn of the millennium, many, including major funders, question the validity and role of African dance in contemporary society and its value to young black people in Britain, but then you have hip hop dance which is primarily about the urban youth subculture asserting their voice and desire to develop the form. Hylton has been able to recognise the form's potential to be a part of the mainstream British dance discourse and his use of abstraction allows his work to question the Eurocentric viewing of the form. He creates work with a sly wit, which makes his work a far cry from the popular commercial notions of hip hop; his compositional strategies seek cultural fulfilment and offer his own form of social critique. Reinvention and reclamation destabilises hegemonic discourses.

Phoenix have been labelled as a 'black dance company' throughout their existence, despite using a white contemporary dance technique and the different agendas of the artistic directors. This has meant that the reading of their choreographic work has highlighted certain aspects of the lived experience of the black diaspora. Western discourse can be problematised by 'Blackness', and the troubling affect of blackness becomes heightened when located on certain bodies marked as black. Hence, the use of a mainstream 'white' technique performed by racialised bodies of colour troubles the dominant discourse. Thus, it is interesting to note that all of the artists/companies use contemporary dance as their 'default'; whilst Hylton makes the movement language of hip hop his creative force and Lawal incorporates 'traditional' West African dance and other forms to create a 'universal' dance language.

In Britain, the development of African dance has hit a crossroads; more choreographers are beginning to explore new forms of contemporary African dance presentations, but Ramdhanie (2005) argues that there may not be the underpinning knowledge of the basic vocabulary in traditional practice to ground the work. The choreography produced by British based artists who are Black is becoming more about articulating the individual voice and style, and less about the racial category of 'blackness'. They have been able to present a new outlook both within the more traditional and more experimental dance forms. However, there are still a lot of 'barriers' to acceptance and full understanding.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

As was highlighted in the introduction, classification and categorisation are rarely neutral and always reveal something about the ideology of the people who create them, so artists are very much concerned that any label attached to their artistic practice conflates the artists that they are with the genre they work in. While the artists may try to embody a sense of agency and individual identity not bound by cultural conventions, audiences may receive their work in ways that can limit this because of their knowledge and understanding of the labels placed on their work and their previous experiences of dance and/or the artist. A performance can become the artistic representation of ethnic or racial identity, rather than a serious artistic product that contributes to a larger framework of theatre dance within a culturally diverse society; it has been demonstrated that the classification of an artist as 'Black' or 'South Asian' usually leads to exoticisation and to an engagement with their work at a superficial level, forgetting the multiplicity of layers found in both cultural and artistic understanding.

In differing ways all of the case studies examined disrupt normative ideologies of white Western dance. Holden (2004) has argued that culture is often a personal, private encounter and it has been demonstrated that the work of the artists/companies included have all 'choreographed' alternate ways of being British based artists who are Black and British Asian artists, forging form and structure through the 'confusion' of complex ideological and political theorisations and tensions. Whilst not dismissing the cultural and historical significance of Bharata Natyam, Jeyasingh has reconceptualised the classical dance language for the British

contemporary environment by choreographing work that is shaped by ideas that are in tune with the experience of the metropolitan migrant; crossing boundaries, travelling between centres and margins, displacement and diversity. Khoo has critically commented through his choreography on the history and context of Bharata Natyam (and ballet to an extent) and the development of this within a patriarchal society as he examines notions of androgyny in performance, within the frameworks of classicism, gender and South Asian dance to disrupt normative expectations of gender and 'tradition'. Khan offers an insight into the global crisis and the dynamism of being a British Asian dancer as his work deliberately probes the issue of identity and his attempts to disrupt his own embodied knowledge by embracing postmodernity and multinationalism to occupy an 'in between' space. Phoenix have been labelled as a 'black company' so have had certain expectations pushed on them, but the use of a 'white' contemporary dance technique and the creation of choreographic work that has highlighted certain aspects of the lived experience of the Black Diaspora have been able to trouble dominant discourse. Lawal has created a technique, embodying his own cultural knowledge system, and has infused western dance training with movement principles that reflect his own identity, as well as utilising strategies to physically express internal presence and energy. Hylton has been able to recognise the potential of hip hop and his use of abstraction allows his work to question the Eurocentric viewing of the form, whilst his compositional strategies seek cultural fulfilment and offers his own form of social critique.

Perceptions of different ethnicities affect not only the way that the work of these artists is understood, but also how it is created; each artist and company has had a very clear approach towards issues of ethnicity, culture and identity, and this has



been clearly signalled to the audience. For example, Khan has clearly highlighted his identity and how he is negotiating this throughout his work, whereas, Jeyasingh has also concerned with presenting her work in such a manner as to direct the audience its formal aspects. Through engaging with the artists/companies development from 1983 to 2008, I have demonstrated the changes in, for example, Jeyasingh, Khan and Phoenix's aesthetic and artistic philosophies; at each stage of her career Jeyasingh has negotiated the hierarchy and politics of the conventional performance space challenging the perspective of audiences more and more over time. In addition I have pointed to ways in which her choreographic abilities for deconstructing Bharata Natyam and utilising its components with idiosyncratic movement has problematised the dominant discourse: Khan has moved away from a deconstruction of Kathak to a communication of a lived history in the development of complex and innovative dance theatre work. Phoenix have had a diverse history due to changes in artistic directors, leadership, cultural make up of the choreographers and dancers, but as I have shown there has also been a change in focus, repertoire and marketing that was a clear response to the cultural agendas and ACE policies. This means that varying levels of the Black Atlantic are visible in their work. During this time period, the possibilities of artistic production have also changed; Hylton has been able to pose quite different challenges to the viewer than Khoo for example, because he has maintained a cutting edge use of media, technology and the moving images in his work.

Each diasporic artist/company analysed shows concern about authority and power, and some demonstrating further the need to 'fight', struggle and unveil something that is missing; there is a strong desire to belong with others on an equal standing

(hence, why Jeyasingh, for example, is so adamant about trying to become part of the 'mainstream'). Freedom of expression has rarely been an option. I have discussed misreading of their work by critics and pointed out the underlying expectations due to colonial history and ideas about race, so creativity and spontaneity has not always been seen and read on the terms that artists/companies have intended.

Some of the artists/companies have been able to represent themselves positively, whilst at other times the label is a 'burden of representation' (for example, Phoenix were given the label of a 'black dance company' which has affected the way that funders and audiences have viewed their work and created certain expectations that they have needed to try and negotiate). However, throughout the work of the artists/companies examined in this thesis, there has been an insistence on complexity and an articulation of an aesthetic of 'defiant hope', to tell the truth about who we are, where we have been and where we are headed, even though this has not necessarily been understood by all audiences. They have all been inspiring, to varying degrees, in many ways: artistically, politically, discursively.

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